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UNIT COLLAPSE
A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF TWO
DIVISIONAL BATTLES IN 1918 AND 1944

A Thesis presented to the Faculty of the U.S. Army
Command and General Staff College in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree

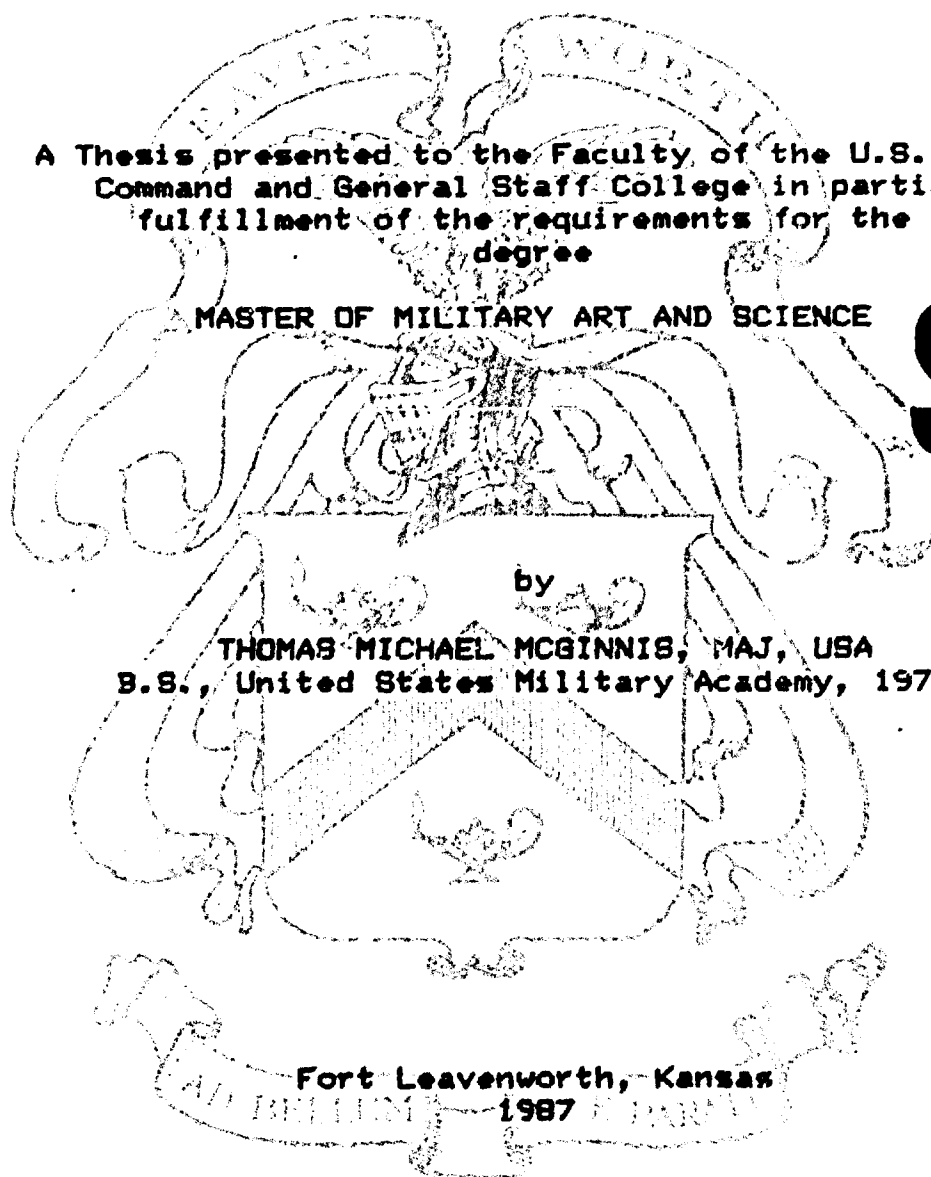
MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE

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by

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ABSTRACT

UNIT COLLAPSE: A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF TWO DIVISIONAL BATTLES
IN 1918 AND 1944, by Major Thomas Michael McGinnis, USA,
120 pages

This study seeks to determine the potential causes for unit collapse in combat through a comparison and analysis of two American divisions. The first, the 35th Infantry Division fought in the Meuse-Argonne Offensive in September 1918, in World War I. The second, the 28th Infantry Division, collapsed while attacking into the Huertgen Forest in November 1944, during World War II. Each divisions' performance is examined from activation through disintegration using the available historical records. The analysis of the battles focuses on the collapse of the separate infantry regiments and battalions. The study uses current theories on unit collapse as a basis for the analysis.

It concludes that current theory only partially explains the issues involved. These units collapsed because of a number of interactive forces that began as the divisions prepared for combat. The most important factors involved the interrelationship within the command, control and communication system. This included leadership performance, stability in command, and key personnel casualties. In both cases the tactical employment of the divisions and their communications breakdowns had major adverse impacts. Finally, the negative effects of terrain and the actions of the enemy exacerbated the adverse conditions. Prior combat experience and excessive enlisted casualties were not the primary causes in the majority of regiments analyzed.

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The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of the student author and do not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College or any other governmental agency. (References to this study should include the foregoing statement.)

ABSTRACT

UNIT COLLAPSE: A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF TWO DIVISIONAL
BATTLES IN 1918 AND 1944, by Major Thomas Michael
McGinnis, USA, 121 pages

This study seeks to determine the potential causes for unit collapse in combat through a comparison and analysis of two American divisions. The first, the 35th Infantry Division fought in the Meuse-Argonne Offensive in September 1918, in World War I. The second, the 28th Infantry Division, collapsed while attacking into the Huertgen Forest in November 1944, during World War II. Each divisions' performance is examined from activation through disintegration using the available historical records. The analysis of the battles focuses on the collapse of the separate infantry regiments and battalions. The study uses current theories on unit collapse as a basis for this analysis.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

War is not a pretty thing, even in victory. It is uglier still in defeat. It is at its ugliest when it invokes its awful power to cast brave men as cowards. Twice now this had happened in the ... Division's battle This time it was not even an enemy attack that set it off; threat of attack alone had been enough. Here it was at its ugliest and its most inexplicable, that mysterious mass contagion which through centuries of warfare has oftentimes gripped even the most experienced troops. It was ugly, incredible but nonetheless real.¹

The preceding quotation suggests that the collapse of this World War II American infantry battalion was a "mysterious mass contagion." However, it may not have been as unfathomable as the author suggests. An understanding of its causes is extremely important to the American Army. In all of its major wars, American units, at various times, have collapsed while facing the enemy. In the Revolutionary War, Washington's forces collapsed while defending Long Island. In the Civil War, both Confederate and Union units collapsed at Chickamauga. In World War I, the 35th Infantry Division collapsed while attacking in the Meuse-Argonne Offensive. Numerous units collapsed during World War II, including the 28th Infantry Division in the Huertgen Forest. Finally, in Korea, the Chinese Communists overran the 2nd Infantry Division in November

1950. In each case when a unit collapsed, it had disastrous consequences; therefore, it is extremely important to understand why units collapse.

CURRENT THEORY

One of the first military thinkers to seriously write about unit collapse was Colonel Charles J. Ardant duPicq. In his pioneering work, Battle Studies, he tried to determine the causes for victory and defeat of armies. His analyses led him to the conclusion that man was the critical ingredient in battle.² Consequently, Ardant duPicq examined the impulses which affected the soldier on the battlefield.

He postulated that "Man is capable of standing before a certain amount of terror; beyond that he flees from the battle."³ He believed that the moral superiority of the attacker, combined with surprise, could instill fear in the enemy and cause the most resolute defenders to flee.⁴ Furthermore, the dispersal of soldiers on the modern battlefield created feelings of isolation which made the fighting man more susceptible to the psychological effects of an attack.⁵ He contended that an overreliance on technical and material measures could demoralize a force if, and when, the material supports failed.

Ardant duPicq believed that military organizations could overcome these problems. The first requirement was strong discipline imposed by the leaders while the army prepared for battle.⁶ When the soldiers dispersed under fire, a strong sense of unit cohesion was essential to provide mutual moral support among the soldiers and prevent disintegration.⁷ Ardant duPicq identified fear, surprise caused by enemy action and friendly material failure, psychological and physical isolation, loss of officer control and lack of cohesion as possible contributing factors to unit collapse.

Also commenting on the dynamics of unit collapse was S.L.A. Marshall in Men Against Fire, first published in 1947. Marshall continued the examination of Ardant duPicq's critical battlefield element but shifted the focus to the American fighting soldier. He stated that "In the course of ... [World War II] we learned anew that man is supreme, that it is the soldier who fights who wins battles..."⁸ Marshall believed that soldiers fought for their comrades. However, if the soldier considered himself alone and isolated, he became demoralized and combat ineffective.⁹ The tactical dispersion required for survival when the soldiers came under fire, added to this feeling of isolation.¹⁰ Consequently, it was essential for strong appointed or emergent leaders to lead from the front and try to control their soldiers during battle.¹¹

Marshall believed that effective interpersonal communication were critical to maintenance of small unit control and cohesion in combat and that it was the leaders' duty to foster that information-sharing process.¹²

At one point Marshall specifically addressed the causes of unit disintegration. He contended that "... every large panic starts with some very minor event ... They [run] as a body because something had happened which had made them suddenly and desperately fearful."¹³ He believed that some unexplained movement to the rear causes the other soldiers, if they do not know its reason, to join the suspected flight. Consequently, commanders must keep their soldiers well informed of the tactical situation and unit status.¹⁴ Marshall contended that poor information flow, which can lead to surprise, is another potential cause of collapse. He also reemphasized the importance of the leader and the how isolation contributed to fear in the soldier.

Dr. Dorothy Clark of Johns Hopkins University conducted a major study on "Casualties as a Measure of the Loss of Combat Effectiveness of an Infantry Battalion" for the Department of the Army in 1954. Her study examined 44 infantry battalions in 7 different engagements in World War II. She attempted to identify the percentage of casualties a unit could sustain prior to becoming combat ineffective. Her analysis indicated that the use of specific casualty

percentages to determine combat effectiveness was "a gross oversimplification not supported by the combat data."¹⁶ However, she went on to write that losses of "4 to 23 percent in enlisted men ... and the resultant temporary demoralization can be swiftly exploited...Complete demoralization of such a unit ... may be achieved by the infliction of losses in the range of 40 to 70 percent."¹⁸

Despite this, her research indicated that the difference in the ability of the individual infantry battalions to carry out their missions was not solely a function of the casualties sustained. Rather, leadership, fire support and reinforcements, and communication were "the most frequent and powerful influences."¹⁷ Consequently, Clark's study adds casualties, friendly fire support and reinforcements to the list of potential factors contributing to unit collapse.

One of the more recent works to present possible causes for unit collapse is Richard Holmes' Acts of War: The Behavior of Men in Battle. While Holmes covers the broad spectrum of issues concerning men in battle, he devotes a short section to potential causes for unit disintegration. He cites and supports Marshall's contention that panic is triggered by a misunderstood action followed by blind flight. Holmes reiterates Ardant duPicq's caution against an overreliance on technical means

for defense as well as the importance of moral forces. He suggests that heavy bombardment increases stress and creates feelings of isolation which both Ardant duPicq and Marshall cited as a potential cause of panic. He provides examples from the Verdun trenches of World War I, carpet bombing in World War II and the Falkland Island campaign. Holmes gives examples of the British in the Eritrea in 1940 and the Israelis in 1973 to suggest that command actions are another influential factor contributing to the conditions surrounding unit collapse.¹⁰ Finally, he introduces collective fatigue as a potential factor when he writes that, "a collective form of low-key combat exhaustion in which a whole unit simply drifts, slowly and undramatically, away from the firing line."¹¹ Holmes introduces artillery fire and collective exhaustion as potential factors affecting collapse.

These authors provide an excellent overview of the significant theories on the causes of unit collapse. Each suggests several different factors that act as the primary cause of collapse. The most significant is the role that the leader and communications play in overcoming the paralyzing effects of fear and isolation. Another critical issue is the role of the enemy in creating surprise and concentrating his indirect fire power. Physical issues such as the extent of casualties and collective exhaustion are other potential causes.

THESIS

This thesis will examine these and other potential causes for unit collapse. It will test the hypothesis that there are physical, psychological, or other factors which are common to units that collapse in combat. It will do this through examination of two historical examples of American units.

DEFINITIONS

In discussing unit collapse, it is first necessary to define what is meant by collapse. For the purpose of this thesis, "collapse" is the sudden inability of a unit to perform the mission it originally undertook. A particularly disastrous type of collapse is when a unit disintegrates. A unit "disintegrates" when its soldiers or subelements lose the willingness or ability to perform their combat function in such a manner that their superiors are unable to control them.

It is important to distinguish unit collapse from loss of combat effectiveness. It is possible for a unit to become combat ineffective without collapsing. Units which are not combat effective might be willing to continue to fight. However, their combat power is so depleted that they are no longer able to carry on the battle. This is contrasted with unit collapse where the unit may be physically capable of continuing to fight but is unwilling or unable to do so.

METHODOLOGY

This thesis will analyze and compare two American National Guard divisions that collapsed during offensive operations to determine if there are factors in common to units that collapse. The two divisions chosen were the 35th Infantry Division and the 28th Infantry Division. The 35th Infantry Division collapsed during the Meuse-Argonne Offensive in September 1918, in World War I. The 28th Infantry Division collapsed while attacking into the Huertgen Forest in November 1944, during World War II. These divisions were first chosen because they had an identifiable collapse as opposed to simply being defeated by a stronger opponent. Additionally, sufficient material was available to provide an in-depth analysis. Finally, the causes for each collapse are still controversial. The fact that National Guard divisions were chosen represents no particular bias against such units. Examples of Regular and National Army division collapses are also possible.

In structuring the study, divisions were chosen as the major units for several reasons. First, they control several smaller combat units, specifically, regiments and battalions. They are the first unit to have significant combat arms other than infantry available to influence the action of their subordinate units. Since these combat multipliers may not necessarily engage in actual combat, the division continues to exist despite staggering losses

to or collapse of any one or several of its engaged regiments or battalions.

Within the divisional framework, this study will focus on the actions of battalions and regiments. These are studied because they are the largest units in which almost all members engage in actual combat with the enemy in carrying out the divisions' missions. They are large enough to act independently in support of division plans and have sufficient smaller companies, platoons and squads to offset any one weak subelement. Conversely, they are small enough to act as cohesive elements so that the soldiers within them generally experience similar combat conditions. They are the general focus of a soldier's sense of unit identity and cohesion. Analysis of two divisional engagements at this echelon provided examples of four regimental and two battalion collapses. It also provided two regiments and one battalion which lost combat effectiveness but did not collapse.

To focus the examination of these divisions, the analysis was directed at physical, psychological, and other factors which might have caused the collapse. The first factors tested were those identified by the writers cited previously. Other issues examined included command and control, friendly tactical employment, the actions of opposing forces, previous experience, training, terrain, length of the battle, and soldier expectations.

Taken together these factors cover the major influences on a division in combat. This broad approach fills a void in current research about men in battle which has focused primarily on individual soldiers and the factors affecting them. The United States Army along with all others, has experienced this problem throughout its history and can expect to face it again in the future. Therefore, it is important to analyze those units which have collapsed to determine if any common causative factors emerge.

ENDNOTES

¹Charles B. MacDonald, The Battle of the Huertgen Forest (New York: Modern Literary Editions Publishing Company, 1963), p. 173.

²Charles J. Ardant duPicq, translated by John N. Greely and Robert C. Cotton, Battle Studies: Ancient and Modern (Harrisburg, PA: The Military Service Publishing Company, 1946), p. 110.

³Ardant duPicq, p. 113.

⁴Ardant duPicq, pp. 81-85.

⁵Ardant duPicq, p. 99.

⁶Ardant duPicq, p. 102.

⁷Ardant duPicq, pp. 96-97, 121.

⁸S.L.A. Marshall, Men Against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command in Future War (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1978), p. 23.

⁹Marshall, p. 42.

¹⁰Marshall, p. 90.

¹¹Marshall, pp. 99-103.

¹²Marshall, pp. 133-136.

¹³Marshall, p. 145.

¹⁴Marshall, p. 145-148.

¹⁵Dorothy K. Clark, "Casualties as a Measure of the Loss of Combat Effectiveness of an Infantry Battalion," (Baltimore: Operations Research Office, The Johns Hopkins University, Technical Memorandum ORO-T-289, August, 1954), p. 3.

¹⁶Clark, p. 3.

¹⁷Clark, p. 3.

¹⁸Richard Holmes, Acts of War: The Behavior of Men in Battle (New York: The Free Press, 1985), pp. 225-231.

¹⁹Holmes, p. 229.

CHAPTER II

THE COLLAPSE OF THE 35TH DIVISION

IN THE MEUSE-ARGONNE

SEPTEMBER, 1918

The British say that the Battle of Waterloo was won on the cricket lawns of Eton and Harrow. The 35th Division ... lost its punch on the dancing floors of West Point, in the Efficiency Board rooms at Camp Doniphan, and in the United States Army system which replaces National Guard officers, however competent, with Regular Army officers, however incompetent.¹

This explanation, extracted from the 35th Division's World War I history, From Vauquois Hill to Exermont, provides a simple explanation for its collapse in combat. It implies that the West Point trained Regular Army officers were incompetent. In this incompetence, they tried to eliminate fully capable National Guard officers for inefficiency. While this explanation may satisfy the pride of the 35th Division's soldiers, it only touches on one possible cause for this collapse. To understand this unit's collapse, it is necessary to go beyond these simplistic emotional reactions.

The 35th Division collapsed while fighting in the Meuse-Argonne Offensive from 26 to 30 September 1918. After only four days of fighting, the division was no longer an effective combat division. Only the emergency

use of the 35th Division's engineer regiment stopped a German counterattack from recapturing large amounts of hard won territory. The First Army had to rush the veteran 1st Division into the line to relieve the 35th. The I Corps Inspector General who investigated the collapse stated, "That after Sept. 27th the Division was really one in name only as maneuvering [sic] power with intact units, except the Engineers [sic] ceased to exist."²

This chapter will examine the causes for the collapse of 35th Division. First, it will review the preparation of the division for deployment and combat. Next, it will describe the setting for the battle and the actual sequence of events in combat leading to the collapse of the individual regiments. Finally, it will analyze the causes for the division's collapse.

ORGANIZATION, TRAINING AND PREPARATION

On 5 August 1917, the Kansas and Missouri National Guard Brigades were ordered into Federal service and designated the 35th Division. Missouri contributed 14,282 men while Kansas added 9,781. Draftees, primarily from Kansas and Missouri filled out the ranks to approximately 27,000 soldiers.³ The newly activated 35th Division organized in Camp Doniphan, Oklahoma for training in early September.⁴

At Camp Doniphan, the division underwent its initial reorganization and training. To bring the newly formed division under the Army's new tables of organization, the nine National Guard regiments were reorganized into four full strength regiments. Still other regiments were split to form the necessary support units such as machine gun battalions. One result of this action was that approximately 50% of the senior Guard commanders no longer had units to command.

At this point it is necessary to review the structure of the World War I square of the 35th Division. This division had two infantry brigades, an artillery brigade, an engineer regiment, a signal battalion and a machine gun battalion. The division had a combined total strength of 28,059 officers and men. The infantry brigade consisted of two infantry regiments of three battalions each. In the 35th Division, the 69th Brigade normally commanded the 137th and 138th Regiments while the 70th Brigade controlled the 139th and 140th Regiments. Brigadier generals commanded brigades, colonels commanded regiments and majors commanded battalions. An infantry regiment was authorized 3768 officers and enlisted men. Of these, 3172 enlisted men and 87 officers were members of the combat infantry battalions or machine gun companies.*

Following this reorganization, Major General William M. Wright, the Regular Army division commander, left for an inspection tour of France on 17 September 1917. Brigadier General Lucien G. Barry, a Regular Army officer and the artillery brigade commander, assumed the command of the division until Wright's return on 10 December 1917.⁷ Consequently, General Barry was responsible for resolving the status of the senior National Guard Officers in the division. During the fall of 1917 and spring of 1918, he eliminated several senior Guard officers for inefficiency or medical reasons. A medical board discharged Brigadier General H.C. Clark, the "father" of the current Missouri National Guard, for high blood pressure and bad lungs. Brigadier General Arthur B. Donnelly of the St. Louis National Guard resigned rather than undergo examination. Four colonels, three of whom were regimental commanders, were removed from the division for inefficiency. At least three lieutenant colonels and four majors were discharged or transferred for efficiency or medical reasons.⁸

By the time the division launched its attack in September 1918, Regular Army officers filled almost all senior command and staff positions. These included the commanding general, both brigade and division artillery commanders and three of four regimental commanders. In the key staff positions, the chief of staff, G-1, G-3, quartermaster, signal officer and machine gun officer were

all Regular Army. The adjutant, inspector general and engineer had been Regular Army until July, 1918, when National Guard officers resumed those duties. The remaining field grade officers in the division were National Guardsman. The average age of these senior officers was 44 years old with only three being below 40.⁹

After completing its initial organization in September 1917, the division began its training. Training for the first sixteen weeks, following the War Department circular on the subject, emphasized trench warfare methods for the officers, a system of schools for all specialties, and practical instruction for the individual soldiers. In February and March 1918, the division concentrated on small unit to division collective training as well as emphasizing specialist schools. These included a leadership school for platoon leaders and a liaison school attended by almost 3000 students. Collective training included exercises in both trench and open warfare. Training culminated on 2 April with a division road march of eight miles which included minor tactical problems and communications exercises.¹⁰

Between 11 April and early June 1918, the division was enroute overseas.¹¹ However, sufficient infantry had arrived by 22 May to begin training in France. The four infantry regiments each occupied different training sites

behind the British. During the next month the regiments interrupted their prescribed training to move closer to their future trench sector. This cost the division thirteen training days and brought a new set of British advisors to conduct the training. Training during this period emphasized individual soldier skills with some small unit marches. A significant weakness during this period was the lack of signal training because the signal battalion had not yet arrived in France. A second move brought the division behind the relatively quiet sector of the front in the Vosges mountains for two weeks of further training. This move involved both a shift in location and a change in advisors from British to French. The new program emphasized trench warfare.¹²

On 30 June, the division began sharing responsibility for the Wasserling sector of the front with a French division for about 30 days. During this period, the American units concentrated on small unit tactics for trench fighting. The division directed the units in reserve to secure adequate training space and to conduct training in open warfare. In compliance with this directive, on 13 July the 70th Brigade conducted a brigade command and control exercise without troops. On 2 August, the 69th Brigade conducted the same exercise and followed with a brigade attack in the open on 9 August.¹³

The division's training ended on 14 August when it assumed full responsibility for about 30 kilometers of the French Gerardmer sector. It remained in this area until 1 September when it was relieved and used as the First Army reserve in the St. Mihiel operation.¹⁴ To support the offensive, the division conducted night movements on 10, 11 and 15 September. During the nights of 19 and 20 September, the division moved into its attack positions for the Meuse-Argonne offensive. It relieved the French 73rd Division near the Grange-le-Comte Farm. The 69th Brigade occupied forward positions behind French outposts with two battalions until the attack on the morning of 26 September.¹⁵

Before looking at the Meuse-Argonne attack, a comparison with the training time of other American divisions in the American Expeditionary Force is important. The prescribed training plan called for three distinct phases. The first phase was small unit tactics with the second being service in a quiet sector of the front. During the third phase units returned to a training area to correct deficiencies and conduct division maneuvers in open warfare. Eight divisions in France completed all three phases. Two of them, the 80th and 33rd participated in the attack on 26 September. Six divisions only completed the first phase. Of these, the 37th, 79th and 91st participated in the offensive. Fifteen divisions,

including the 35th, completed the first two phases of training. They averaged 58 training days while the 35th conducted 66. Four two-phase divisions, the 4th, 28th, 35th and 77th joined the attack on the opening day of the offensive.¹⁶ Of these units, the 35th Division performed the poorest in the Meuse-Argonne offensive.

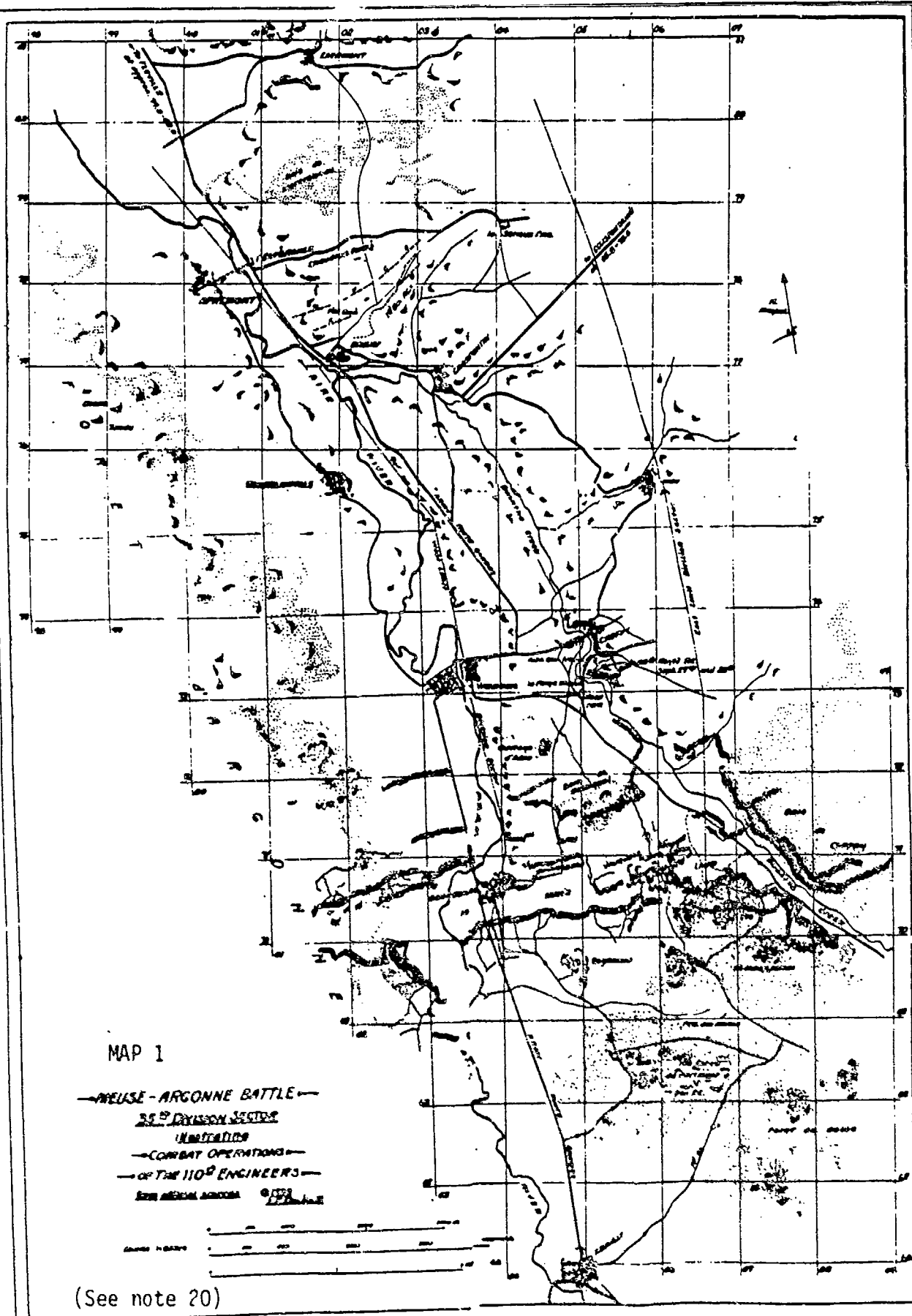
Between activation and commitment, the division chain of command experienced tremendous turbulence. When Major General Peter E. Traub assumed command of the division on 20 July 1918, he was the fourth division commander since activation in August 1917. During this period the division had four chiefs of staff with the latest being assigned on 20 September 1918. The 69th Brigade had four commanders and the 70th Brigade had three. At regimental level the turnover was even higher. Two regiments had seven changes of command, one had six, and the last had only three. At battalion level the average number of commanders was 3.5. The culmination of this revolving door policy occurred on the eve of the battle. On 21 September 1918 both infantry brigades received new commanders along with the 139th Regiment. On 22 September, the 140th Regiment received a new commander. On 25 September a new commander reported to the 138th Regiment. Furthermore, at the start of the battle, three of twelve battalion commanders were captains whose only experience was in the National Guard.¹⁷ Therefore, the

division changed two brigade commanders and three of four regimental commanders in less than a week.

ATTACK IN THE MEUSE-ARGONNE

The terrain in which the 35th Division would fight was generally open rolling farmland. However, to enter this territory, the division had to pass through approximately 500 meters of battle-scarred no-man's land covered by heavy wire entanglements. Vauquois Hill, with its strong fortifications, complex trench system and extensive obstacles dominated the division sector. Once past this initial defensive position, ravines and destroyed villages dotted the open farmland. These offered excellent locations for enemy machine gun positions. There were three small forests in the sector which the enemy used to conceal machine gun positions. These were the Rossignol, Cheppy, and the largest, the Montrebeau Woods. Additionally, the enemy had excellent artillery observation from the Argonne Forest to the west of the division sector and the hills to the north of Exermont.¹⁰ Finally, the Suanthe Creek divided the sector as far north as Charpentry. The sector started at a width of 2500 meters at the line of departure and expanded to 5000 meters at Exermont.¹⁰ (See Map 1, page 21)

The mission of the 35th Division was relatively simple. The I Corps Field Order Number 57 directed the 35th Division to advance six kilometers to the ridge east



of Charpentry to the corps objective. Then, it required a sixteen kilometer advance to positions north of Exermont to take the First Army objective by the end of the first day. It also provided extensive instructions for liaison within the army. These included guidance on the axis of liaison, visual signals, the use of pigeons, pyrotechnics and panel markings for aircraft.²¹

The division translated these instructions into an attack along a two and a half kilometer front. It designated the 59th Brigade to lead the attack followed by the 70th Brigade. The general configuration of the division's units for the attack is shown below:

59th Brigade

137th Infantry Regiment
3rd Battalion

138th Infantry Regiment
3rd Battalion

2nd Battalion, 139th Regiment (mop-up)

2nd Battalion
1st Battalion (reserve)

1st Battalion
2nd Battalion (reserve)

2 Companies of the 129th Machine Gun Battalion

70th Brigade (Division Reserve)

139th Infantry Regiment
3rd Battalion
1st Battalion

140th Infantry Regiment
1st Battalion
2nd Battalion

Brigade Reserve
3rd Battalion, 140th Regiment
128th Machine Gun Battalion
130th Machine Gun Battalion²²

Within this formation, the division directed the 69th Brigade to attack with its regiments abreast with their battalions in column. One battalion was to lead, the second battalion was to follow in support, while the third battalion was to serve as the regimental reserve. The plan called for the lead units to bypass the fortifications on Vauquois Hill and Rossignol Woods. To clear bypassed resistance, a battalion from the 70th Brigade was assigned to the 69th Brigade.²⁰

The enemy facing the 35th Division was the elite 1st Guards Division commanded by the German Crown Prince.²⁴ I Corps G-2 "Summary of Intelligence" rated this division as a first class assault division.²⁵ It had recently moved into the sector to recover from losses sustained in fighting against the French and British to the north. The extensive fortifications covering Vauquois Hill offset some of this weakness. During the course of the battle, the German 5th Guards Division, as well as the 52nd Division, would eventually reinforce the 1st Guards Division and engage the American 35th Division.²⁶

The 35th Division's attack lasted for four days. It commenced at 0530 hours on 26 September with the 69th Brigade leading the assault. Prior to jump off the artillery conducted an extensive three hour artillery preparation of the battlefield. In the darkness and dense fog of the early morning, the lead regiments bypassed the

fortified positions of Vauquois hill. Then, in accordance with its plan, the designated battalion from the 139th Regiment quickly mopped up enemy resistance through flank and rear attacks on Vauquois Hill. Despite the intermingling of units, by the end of the day the division had advanced about six kilometers to capture the I Corps objective on a line between Charpentry and Ver./.²⁷

Confusion, which began on the first day, carried over into the second. The I Corps ordered the division to attack at 0530 hours. However, the chief of staff, Colonel Hamilton S. Hawkins, postponed it until 0830 hours to await artillery support. However, the division commander countermanded him and ordered the attack to start at 0530 hours.²⁸ Despite the hour delay from the original attack order, the artillery could only support with one battalion. Consequently, the attack started poorly and stopped short of the Charpentry-Baulny line due to heavy enemy artillery and machine gun fire. Finally, at 1730 hours, the division launched a new attack with tank support and captured the towns of Charpentry and Baulny prior to stopping for the evening.²⁹

By the third day, 28 September, the division was extremely disorganized with the 137th and 139th Regiments completely intermingled. Despite the confusion, the division resumed the attack at 0530 hours. Throughout the day the attack traversed open terrain in the face of heavy

machine gun fire. Additionally, the German artillery located in the Argonne Forest, pounded it with flanking fire. Nonetheless, the division successfully advanced two kilometers to the Montrebeau Woods.²⁰ To try to return some order to the chaos, during the course of the day, the division commander reorganized the brigades. The 69th Brigade took command of the left sector with the badly mixed 137th and 139th Regiments. The 70th Brigade took command of the right sector with the 138th and 140th Regiments.²¹

By the night of 28 September the fighting in the Montrebeau Woods had further mixed the division. Nonetheless, General John J. Pershing, the First Army commander, while visiting the division on 28 September, ordered a general advance without objectives for the next morning.²² With this mission direct from Pershing, the division made a series of uncoordinated attempts to advance. Several small groups advanced about a kilometer to reach Exermont. However, the Germans concentrated heavy artillery fire and counterattacked with fresh troops. The strength of the attack drove the Americans out of Exermont.²³

On the afternoon of 29 September, the Germans continued their counterattack by infiltrating through the Montrebeau Woods to the rear of the frontline American units. At that point, the division commander ordered a

withdrawal.²⁴ During the afternoon the disorganized remnants of the regiments fell back through a hastily established defensive position manned by the 110th Engineer Regiment.²⁵ Whenever possible, officers stopped stragglers to place them into defensive positions.²⁶ The 35th Division held this line until 30 September when the 1st Division relieved them.²⁷

The four days of intense fighting had seen a division with over a year's training collapse during its first major attack. Almost from the first, the division lost control of its brigades and regiments. By the end, attacks "consisted of only groups of men under such officers as happened to be with them."²⁸ To understand this collapse, it is important to look beneath the general divisional battle and see what the regiments experienced. During this examination each regiment will be analyzed to determine the point it collapsed and the causes for that collapse.

COLLAPSE OF THE 137TH REGIMENT

The most severe collapse of the battle was in the 137th Regiment. This regiment led the attack on the left flank on the morning of 26 September. The regiment met with astounding initial success. Despite the heavy fog and the disorientation it caused, the 137th Regiment advanced over three kilometers by 0930 hours. Then, south of Varennes, it stopped in the face of enemy resistance.²⁹

By afternoon, the 139th Regiment had completed the mop up of Vauquois Hill and had closed with the 137th Regiment. Lieutenant Colonel Carl L. Ristine, commander of the 139th Regiment, requested permission from his brigade to continue the advance. When Ristine did not receive acknowledgment of his request from brigade, the two regimental commanders on their own initiative agreed to pass the 139th Regiment through the 137th Regiment east of Varennes. This occurred between 1400 and 1700 hours. They did this without orders and without informing the troops of the 137th Regiment or their brigade commander. In the confusion, numerous soldiers from the 137th Regiment joined the 139th Regiment and continued the advance.⁴⁰

On 27 September, the situation deteriorated into mass confusion. That day the 137th Regiment followed the 139th Regiment at the beginning of the advance. During the evening attack, the 137th regimental commander, Colonel Clad Hamilton, who was suffering from exhaustion, gave command of the regiment to Major John H. O'Conner. Thus, one of the two remaining National Guard regimental commanders left the battlefield. The 137th Regiment then advanced and became intermingled with the 139th Regiment by the end of the attack.⁴¹

This combined mass of soldiers continued to advance on 28 September until they reached the north end of the Montrebeau Woods that evening. The next morning, in

support of the division attack ordered by General Pershing, the 137th made one final desperate attempt to attack. At 0534 hours the first group (no coherent company organizations existed) of approximately 125 soldiers advanced north to a ravine just south of Exermont. Throughout the advance they encountered heavy artillery and machine gun fire. A second group of 100 men from the 137th Regiment tried to reach the first about 0615 hours but could only advance 300 meters.⁴² Then, under heavy fire from their front and left flank,

... the men lay down. Nothing being done, the men individually decided that it was useless to remain where they were, and quietly, without orders and without panic, slowly retired to the protection of the woods from where they had just come. Efforts of the officers to stop this movement were unavailing.⁴³

By 0800 hours, the men who had reached the ravine had also returned to the woods.⁴⁴ The first regiment of the division had collapsed as a coherent fighting force by the night of the 27th. Despite this, the division continued to push it to attack. Consequently, by the morning of 29 September the 137th Regiment had totally disintegrated.

Of the key factors which caused the collapse and eventual disintegration of this regiment, the most important was the lack of positive command and control of the regiment by its leaders. From the very beginning, the 137th Regiment suffered from command and control problems. As the unit advanced in the fog, soldiers became lost and

units separated. By the time it reached Varennes, the regiment suffered from extensive mixing of units. At 0945 hours, the trailing unit, the 139th Regiment, reported that a battalion of the 137th Regiment was behind it while the bulk of the 137th Regiment was stopped to its front short of Varennes. By afternoon, the 137th Regiment began to lose stragglers from its position. Adding to the confusion at that point, the 139th Regiment passed through the 137th Regiment after a battlefield agreement between the two commanders. When this happened, the 139th Regiment picked up some individual soldiers from the 137th Regiment. Additionally, the 1st Battalion, 137th Regiment followed the 139th Regiment and lost contact with its parent regiment. By nightfall, the 137th Regiment was badly mixed up. Its separate battalions were completely out of touch with each other and regimental headquarters.⁴⁸

The situation on 27 September became worse. During the afternoon attack at 1730 hours, the battalions became even more intermixed with the 139th Regiment. By nightfall, the 137th Regiment was a separate regiment in name only as it was totally intermingled with the 139th Regiment. The attack through the Montrebeau Woods on 28 September added to the straggling and confusion. When the regiment attacked on the morning of 29 September, it could only gather two mixed groups of 125 and 100 men for its attacks.

The repeated absence and changing of commanders added to the confusion and poor command and control. The regiment lost its first commander on the afternoon of 27 September when Colonel Hamilton collapsed from exhaustion. On 28 September the acting regimental commander, Major John H. O'Conner, did not receive the order for the morning attack. He found out about it as the remnants of the 3rd Battalion, 137th Regiment passed through his position to attack north to the Montrebeau Woods.⁴⁶ That morning when the portion of the regiment under his control near Baulny repulsed a German counterattack, MAJ O'Conner also succumbed to exhaustion and left the command. Later that same morning, Colonel Hamilton rejoined the elements of the regiment that had reached the Montrebeau Woods. However, in the interval since O'Conner's departure, the regiment was without a commander.⁴⁷

By the night of 28 September, total confusion reigned in the 137th Regiment. Major O'Conner, after a period of rest, evidently returned to the regiment on that afternoon. However, since he had lost contact with Colonel Hamilton for the last two days, O'Conner was unaware of Hamilton's return. Consequently, O'Conner continued to employ the elements of the regiment with which he was in contact. After positioning his units for the night, O'Conner returned to what he thought was the regimental command post near Baulny. That night, Colonel Hamilton,

unaware of MAJ O'Conner's actions, tried to organize elements of the regiment in the Montrebeau Woods.⁴⁸ Not until the morning of 29 September did Major O'Conner find Colonel Hamilton for the final attack.⁴⁹ Thus, after a morning without a commander, the regiment spent a night with two commanders.

During the course of this battle, the 137th Regiment had units that wandered off out of regimental control. It had two commanders leave their command due to exhaustion. At one point it had no commander. At another point it had two commanders. Given this state of affairs, the regiment had no effective command and control from the very start of the attack.

As a result of the lack of command and control, the Regiment began to lose its cohesion as soon as the attack started. By the night of 27 September, it was totally intermingled with the 139th Regiment. Its commanders could not find groups of soldiers much larger than companies to maneuver. Its soldiers followed other regiments. Soldiers from throughout the division were in the sector of the 137th Regiment. By the morning of 29 September, Colonel Hamilton could find only two small groups of slightly over 100 men each to conduct the attack. An examination of the casualty figures for the battle shows that by the final attack approximately 55% of the regiment's soldiers were out of the regiment's control somewhere on the battlefield. However, they were not all casualties.⁵⁰

Compounding these problems, the regiment suffered extremely heavy officer casualties. The turbulence at the regimental command level has already been discussed. At the battalion level, each battalion changed commanders at least once. In the case of the 2nd Battalion, three different captains commanded the battalion. Consequently, while the regiment started the battle with a colonel, two majors and a captain in command positions, it finished with a major and three captains.⁵¹ In all, 26 of the regiment's officers became casualties.⁵²

Finally, the fog on the first day of the battle started the problems. Individual soldiers became separated from their units. Entire battalions became separated from the regiment. Given the weak command and control structure in place at the time, the regiment was not able to reorganize from the confusion resulting from this initial disorganization.

COLLAPSE OF THE 139TH REGIMENT

The second unit to collapse was the 139th Regiment. It maintained its independent organization reasonably well through 26 September. However, during 27 September, the intermingling with the 137th Regiment began to have an impact. That day, the 1st Battalion, 139th Regiment held its original position. The 2nd Battalion, 139th Regiment passed through the 3rd Battalion to lead the attack and eventually reached the Montrebeau Woods. The 3rd

Battalion, 139th Regiment followed the 2nd Battalion to the Montrebeau Woods but then fell back a kilometer.³⁰

Consequently, by the night of 27 September, the 137th and 139th Regiments were completely intermingled. According to a 35th Division history, "There seemed to be no distinct organization at that time."³¹ The regiment continued its attacks into the Montrebeau Woods on 28 September.

Finally, on 29 September, one small group under Major James E. Rieger, eventually advanced beyond Exermont prior to withdrawing under enemy pressure.³²

The causes of this regiment's problems were similar to those of the 137th. The primary factor was that the 139th Regiment had extremely confused or nonexistent command and control. Initially, prospects looked good for the regiment as it began its attack with surprising success. Not being a lead regiment, the 139th was able to maintain its organization during the fog of the first morning. Lieutenant Colonel Ristine, the other National Guard regimental commander, even managed to regain control of the battalion assigned to mop up the west of Vauquois Hill.³³ However, his subsequent aggressiveness eventually led to disaster.

Ristine seemed to believe that he could most effectively command his regiment from the leading line of skirmishers.³⁴ Leading from the front is often commendable and necessary. However, in this case, the

commander failed to maintain a functioning command post to act in his absence.⁸⁰ Therefore, when he was with the skirmishers, no one coordinated the movements of the three maneuver battalions. Compounding the problem, on the night of 27 September, Lieutenant Colonel Ristine was cut off behind German lines at the same time his headquarters was displacing forward. When this happened, no one in the 139th Regiment knew that he was missing and the headquarters did not reassemble. Consequently, the regiment spent 28 September without a regimental headquarters or commander.⁸¹ At approximately 1800 hours on 28 September, a new regimental commander, Colonel Americus Mitchell, found the command post of the 1st Battalion at Baulny. He spent until midnight wandering the battlefield unable to find the remainder of his command.⁸²

As a result of the poor command and control, the regiment became extremely disorganized. During the passage of lines on 26 September, the 139th Regiment picked up entire battalions of the 137th Regiment along with individual stragglers. During the attacks the next day, its three battalions became separated to the point that the regiment did not know their locations. On 28 September, the battalions became intermingled while passing through the Montrebeau Woods. Consequently, during the final attack on Exermont, the 2nd Battalion commander led elements from both the 2nd and 3rd Battalions.

Additionally, two companies from the 139th Regiment attacked with the 140th Regiment.⁶¹

Throughout the battle, casualties mounted for the 139th Regiment and further contributed to the unit's eventual collapse. Losses were particularly severe among the leaders with 38 officers becoming casualties.⁶² In the 2nd Battalion, all of the officers but one became casualties.⁶³ Among the battalion commanders, the major commanding 1st Battalion was replaced by a captain on 27 September. In the 3rd Battalion, the major in command was killed on the opening day. The battalion finished the battle with a first lieutenant in command. Only the 2nd Battalion, under Major James E. Rieger, retained its commander throughout the operation.⁶⁴

COLLAPSE OF THE 138TH REGIMENT

The 138th Regiment shared a similar fate to its sister regiment in the 69th Brigade. The regiment suffered the morning of 26 September from the dense fog that covered the battlefield. However, it managed to make good progress and advanced three kilometers to reach Cheppy by 0830 hours. In the face of heavy resistance, tank support helped it capture the town by 1230 hours. After reorganizing, the regiment continued the advance north of Very where it spent the first night.⁶⁵ Nonetheless, the fog and heavy fighting of the first day had been enough to severely disorganize the regiment.⁶⁶

On the morning of 27 September, the 140th Regiment passed through the 138th Regiment. For 27 and 28 September, the regiment followed in support and endured enemy artillery fire. Amidst the disorganization on the battlefield, the 138th Regiment moved to the right of the 140th on 27 September. Consequently, elements of the 1st and 2nd Battalions, 138th Regiment attacked with the 140th Regiment on 28 September to seize the east half of the Montrebeau Woods.⁶⁷

On the morning of 29 September, the 70th Brigade Headquarters, then in nominal command of the 138th Regiment could not find the regiment to give it attack orders. Somehow the regiment received the orders and proceeded to advance with 853 men in its three battalions.⁶⁸ During its approach from the Baulny-Charpentry area, the regiment moved into the 69th Brigade's sector on the left of the division, where that brigade commander rerouted the regiment through the Montrebeau Woods. When moving through the woods, the battalions became separated. The 2nd Battalion, 138th Regiment attacked due north from the edge of the forest and reached the Exermont Ravine before stopping in the face of heavy enemy artillery and machine gun fire. The 3rd Battalion moved to the northeast corner of the woods before attacking almost due east. It also quickly stopped under heavy fire from the north and east.⁶⁹ The 1st Battalion remained in the woods in support behind the 3rd Battalion.⁷⁰

When the division commander ordered the withdrawal the battalions had been reduced to "groups" of men.⁷¹ The 1st Battalion was quickly reached and withdrew, picking up stragglers along the way, to positions east of Charpentry. The 2nd Battalion withdrew under control of the 140th Regimental commander from Exermont to positions east of Baulny. The 3rd Battalion commander, on finding the regimental commander dead and believing he could hold the position, disregarded the order and occupied positions on the north edge of Montrebeau woods.⁷²

During this final attack, the 138th Regiment ceased to function as a coherent fighting unit. Extreme unit disorganization and high leadership casualties were the primary causes. By the end of the opening day of fighting, the regiment began to lose its organization. Despite that, its passage of lines on 27 September went reasonably well so that it caused relatively little additional confusion. In its support role, the regiment maintained a semblance of organization. Nonetheless, by the night of 27 September, it had moved on line with the 140th Regiment and on 28 September, two of its battalions left regimental control to attack with the 140th Regiment. Finally, on 29 September, the 139th Regiment moved from the right side of the division to the left. Its battalions then attacked in two different directions and withdrew in three directions under three different commanders. By the end of the battle, the

battalions were only groups of soldiers coalescing around the officers present. There was no regimental organization of any significance.

Adding to the problems of the 138th Regiment, it experienced extensive leadership casualties with 38 officer losses.⁷² Its regimental commander was wounded on 26 September. His replacement killed on 29 September. The 1st Battalion started the battle with a major in command and finished with a first lieutenant after losing the interim captain. The 2nd Battalion started with a captain in command. A captain replaced him on 27 September, a first lieutenant on 28 September and another first lieutenant on 29 September. The captain commanding the 3rd Battalion lasted until the morning of 29 September when he was gassed and replaced by another captain.⁷⁴

COLLAPSE OF THE 140TH REGIMENT

The last regiment in the division, 140th Regiment, remained effective the longest and made the farthest advance before finally pulling back from Exermont. In reserve on 26 September, it maintained its formation throughout the day. On 27 September, it passed through the 138th Regiment in the morning and made limited advances. By the end of the day the battalions had become separated. The 1st Battalion, 140th Regiment advanced one kilometer northeast of Chaudron Farm where it became separated from the rest of the regiment. The 2nd Battalion stopped

northeast of Charpentry. The 3rd Battalion was south of Charpentry along the road.⁷⁵ After heavy fighting on 28 September, the regiment closed up at the Montrebeau Woods. It dug in one kilometer north of Chaudron Farm with the 1st and 3rd Battalions in front and the 2nd Battalion in support.⁷⁶

The final collapse of this regiment occurred 29 September. After two days of heavy fighting the regiment was to pass into a supporting role for the attack on Exermont. However, when the 138th Regiment was late in arriving, the 140th Regiment led the attack. The first attack broke down without much progress. A second attack made it to Exermont with approximately 400 men. One hundred of these moved to the north of the village.⁷⁷ However, 100 men could not hold against German counterattacks supported by artillery and machine gun fire from three sides. The regimental commander, Lieutenant Colonel Channing E. Delaphane, ordered a withdrawal to the Montrebeau Woods. However, individual soldiers would not stop there and continued through the woods until they reached the new division defensive line. Officers at that location tried to put them into line but their lack of even company organization made this an extremely difficult task.⁷⁸

The 140th Regiment finally succumbed to its extensive casualties. After three days of almost continuous fighting under constant German shelling, the regiment suffered the highest number of casualties of any regiment in the division - 1604 casualties during the attack - 48% of its 31 August strength of 3324.⁷⁹ Combined with stragglers this meant the regiment could barely muster 400 men when it finally reached Exermont. At the farthest point of the advance it only had 100 men.⁸⁰

Although suffering extensive casualties, its key battalion and regimental leadership remained almost completely intact. The regimental commander and the major commanding 2nd Battalion were not wounded. The major in command of 1st Battalion was replaced by a captain on the 28th. The major in command of 3rd Battalion commanded until after the capture of Exermont. A captain replaced him at 1000.⁸¹ Furthermore, the regiment suffered only twenty officer casualties -- the lowest total in the division.⁸² This must have contributed to the relative cohesion and effectiveness that the regiment displayed until the very end of the battle. It was only after the commander ordered a withdrawal so that the soldiers left their organizations that the unit finally collapsed.

CAUSES OF THE DIVISION COLLAPSE

The above examination has focused on the proximate causes for the collapse of the individual regiments.

However, these were not the only factors that had an impact on this battle. Activities at brigade and division level also affected all of the units in a similar fashion. These factors played a major role in the collapse of the entire division as a unit.

The command structure and procedures within the 35th Division played a major role in the collapse of this division. From the division's formation as the combination of two National Guard brigades, officer problems started. The combination of separate regiments and brigades resulted in an excess of senior commanders. Over the next nine months, the division initiated discharge boards which eliminated at least 13 field grade officers. This included two brigadier generals and three of the excess regimental commanders. Although not large in number, they were highly visible and adversely affected morale within the division. The division further added to the turbulence on the eve of the battle. In the six days preceding the attack, Major General Traub replaced five of his six infantry regimental and brigade commanders.

With this new leadership, the division commander emphasized General Pershing's orders to lead from the front.²⁰ The results proved catastrophic. The losses among the leadership from battalion through brigade were extraordinary. One of the new brigade commanders fell out from exhaustion at the end of the first day of attack.²¹

Three of four regiments lost at least one commander. Ten of twelve battalions lost at least one commander. Some lost as many as three. At least one regiment, the 139th spent a 24 hour period without a commander because no one knew he was missing. A second regiment was without a commander for at least part of a day.

This was only the beginning of the problem. With the commanders well forward they did not establish fixed command posts. They seemed to believe that their command posts were their persons. The division commander could only communicate with his brigades by personal visit. However, the brigades could not find their regiments.²² The regiments frequently could not find their battalions. The result was that commanders could not send orders down the chain. Nor could they report accurate and timely information up the chain because they could not find higher headquarters.²³ Lieutenant Colonel R.G. Peck, the Inspector General who investigated the collapse concluded in his report:

That the action of brigade and regimental commanders in going far to the front and out of all communication resulted in their having no more effect on the action than so many company or platoon commanders, and prevented the headquarters in rear from sending orders to units in front.²⁴

Complicating the issue, the entire division, from regiment through division failed to establish an effective communications system. By 0830 hours, 26 September, I Corps lost contact with the division. The telephone wires

were out and the division's radio was not in operation.⁸⁸ The division did not have communications with its brigades at the start of the attack. This situation did not improve as the battle progressed. The brigades never successfully ran wire to the regiments. The regiments did not run wire to their battalions. This was partially caused by a lack of equipment which some units left in the rear. Consequently, the primary means of communications throughout the division was runner.⁸⁹ In the environment of the battle, heavy artillery shelling frequently killed or wounded these messengers. If not killed, they could not find the appropriate headquarters because the command posts moved from shell hole to shell hole with the location of the commander.⁹⁰

One of the major contributing causes to the terrible command, control and communications situation was the poor training conducted by the division during its preparation for combat. From the very beginning the division faced conflicting training guidance. The initial War Department guidance directed training in trench warfare. However, after Major General Wright returned from France, he tried to implement General Pershing's directives on open warfare. Compounding the problem, advisors from both the French and British armies trained the division at different times. Consequently, these officers emphasized their armies separate trench experiences.⁹¹ While other

divisions of the American Expeditionary Force faced similar problems, the 35th Division failed to overcome them.

The maneuver training that the 35th Division did conduct was not productive. The division conducted its first major division level maneuver in April just prior to departure for France. On this eight-mile road march some of the problems experienced in the attack surfaced. Among them were failure to follow prescribed routes, poor work by the communications battalion, and delays in starting.⁹² In late May representatives from G-3 and G-5, General Headquarters, inspected the 35th Division in conjunction with four other divisions. They reported that none of the divisions were well trained in open warfare. On 21 June, the division practiced an attack on a stabilized trench line. The critique cited poor communications throughout the division and officers leaving posts without arrangements to continue in their absence. The brigade maneuvers conducted in July and early August showed similar problems. After action reports criticized overreliance on runners, neglect of other forms of communication, poor lateral communication and particularly bad communications from regiment to brigade.⁹³ As the after action reports indicate, the division did conduct a limited amount of maneuver training. However, it failed to learn from its mistakes. The same problems that were first identified in the United States continued through exercises in France. They proved deadly on the battlefield.

The poor exercise of control on the battlefield and correction of training deficiencies are major indicators of weak leadership throughout the division. The division commander, Major General Traub, who assumed command on 20 July 1918, complained that, "From Brigadier General down to Lieutenants it has been the same thing. They decided not to come down hard on anyone but to condone faults on the part of subordinates."¹⁴ Throughout the division's training, advisors and inspectors commented on the lack of discipline and familiarity between officers and men.¹⁵ The Inspector General's report following the battle indicates that at the start of the battle the division "was not a well disciplined combat unit, and that many officers with the division were not well trained leaders."¹⁶ He goes on to conclude "That the intermingling, confusion and straggling which commenced shortly after H-hour showed poor discipline, lack of leadership, and probably poor preparation."¹⁷

One of the contributing causes to the poor discipline and correction of training weakness was the high turnover rate of leadership at battalion and higher level. Battalions, regiments and brigades experienced between three and seven command changes in the twelve months preceding the battle. The division had four different commanders and chiefs of staff. With this much turbulence, commanders spent too little time in their positions to even

identify deficiencies let alone correct them.

Consequently, the problems reported on the division march in April 1918, continued to appear throughout the next six months training and on the battlefield.

High casualty rates compounded the leadership problems and were another factor in the collapse. Three of four regimental commanders and ten of twelve battalion commanders were casualties at least once during the battle. Casualties at company level were just as bad. Where company organizations still existed at the battle's end, second lieutenants or sergeants commanded them.²²

The division as a whole suffered 6006 casualties during the five days of the attack until they were relieved. The four infantry regiments sustained 5256 or 87.5% of the total casualties. This means that the division lost approximately 40% of its infantry regiment strength.²³ This does not include the impact that stragglers and missing had on the action. Given the confusion of the battlefield, this lowered unit strengths and combat effectiveness even further.

Another major factor in this battle was the confusion caused by the weather and terrain. All accounts of the attack mention the denseness of the fog on the first morning and the limited visibility that resulted. This certainly helped the units bypass Vanquois Hill. However, a tremendous amount of straggling resulted. Fighting

through even the relatively small Montrebeau Woods also contributed to the confusion and straggling. This can be seen by the 138th Regiment that split into three different groups after passing through the forest. Finally the five night attacks in 72 hours combined with two passages of lines must have tremendously confused the soldiers.

An idea of the magnitude of this problem can be seen by examining the situation the 138th and 137th Regiments at the time of the final assault on Exermont. The 138th Regiment started the final attack with the largest coherent organization in the division - three distinct battalions totalling 853 men. It suffered 1151 casualties during the entire operation including the final attack. On 31 August, it had 3411 men assigned. Allowing for reasonable absences between 1 and 26 September, the regiment had approximately 1200 soldiers unaccounted for, but not wounded, after just three days of fighting. The situation was even worse in the 137th Regiment. This regiment could muster only 225 men for the final assault. This meant that the 137th Regiment must have had approximately 1700 men, or more than half of its combat strength, wandering around the battlefield.¹⁰⁰

An additional stress on the soldiers was the physical conditions that the soldiers endured. By the morning of 29 September they had gone four nights with little or no sleep. As early as 1800 hours, 27 September,

soldiers in at least one unit reported some men dazed and sleepwalking from the fatigue.¹⁰¹ During the battle at least two regimental and one brigade commander fell out from exhaustion.

The soldiers only carried two days rations to start the attack. Consequently, they spent the last days with little food. ¹⁰² By the third day some of the soldiers were out of both rations and water. As an expedient, they took food and water from the dead Germans on the field.¹⁰³ Sergeant Daniel M. Fels, in his History of A Company, 138th Infantry described the lot of the individual soldier when he said:

...in running the gauntlets under terrific and accurate artillery fire, of six days without one swallow or bite of hot foods, of cold nights spent in shallow holes filled with water, with only a raincoat for cover, strenuous marching and countermarching under fire, these are the things we all endured in common.¹⁰⁴

Given these physical stresses and the loss of leaders, the soldiers melted away prior to and during the final attack.

Fire support, or lack of it, played an important role in this battle. On the opening day, the artillery fired a three hour preparatory barrage followed by a rolling barrage. This greatly aided the success of the first day's attacks in breaking through the first line of German defenses. On the afternoon of 29 September, the artillery fired a major barrage on the Montrebeau Woods after the division withdrew from that area.¹⁰⁵ This

artillery fire assisted in stopping the German counterattack through the Montrebeau Woods.

Except for these two instances at the very beginning and end of the battle, the artillery provided very little effective support for the infantry. By 0830 hours, 26 September, the artillery began to move forward. The artillery did not fire from that time until the morning of 27 September after the division commander delayed the attack waiting for fire support. The artillery finally fired one battalion with so little effect that the infantry did not even notice it.¹⁰⁶ On 29 September, the feeble fire in support of the separate infantry attacks on Exermont was almost totally ineffective.¹⁰⁷ Finally, some of the most important targets, enemy artillery firing from the Argonne Forest, were outside the division sector. Neither division nor corps artillery fired effective counterbattery fire.¹⁰⁸

One factor which helped to make the confusion all possible was the tactical formation which the division used. The division attacked with brigades in column. Given the width of the division and consequently brigade frontages, brigade commanders could visit only one regiment in the morning and one in the afternoon.¹⁰⁹ Combined with the lack of fixed command posts, the result was that the brigade commanders lost control of their brigades on the first day of the battle when the 139th Regiment passed

through the 137th Regiment on its own initiative. To correct the problem, on 28 September, the division formed provisional brigade organizations. The 69th Brigade was on the left with the 137th and 139th Regiments. The 70th Brigade took command of the 138th and 140th Regiments on the right.

The last contributing factor in the collapse of the 35th Division was the enemy response. The 35th opened its attack against the German 1st Guards Division commanded by the Crown Prince. Although understrength, this was considered one of the best divisions on the Meuse-Argonne front.¹¹⁰ As the battle continued, the Germans committed the 5th Guards Division and finally counterattacked with the 52nd Division.¹¹¹ By the end of the battle, these three divisions were fully committed against I Corps and the 35th.

The Germans also maximized the advantage of the defensive. They made extensive use of machine guns firing from concealed positions. They effectively spotted for their artillery. They used the villages, tree lines and ravines as prepared positions that the Americans had to assault. Finally, when they counterattacked, they infiltrated two regiments to the south edge of the Montrebeau Woods. With this move they were behind the advanced American position and added impetus to the American withdrawal.¹¹²

CONCLUSIONS

The 35th Division collapsed as a fighting division by the second day of its attack. Nonetheless, its regiments continued their individual, uncoordinated attacks for two more days until they disintegrated in the face of fresh German forces. Before the division entered battle, the frequent changing of key commanders and the numerous reliefs the week prior to the attack weakened the chain of command. Once the attack began, the command structure within the division failed to adequately function. Division lost contact with its brigades as soon as the attack began. Brigades lost control of their regiments the first afternoon. Regiments lost control of their battalions by the second day. By the third day battalions had lost control of their companies. After the attack on the final day, groups of soldiers of platoon strength filtered individually back to the defensive line. The command structure had totally broken down.

This breakdown caused the collapse of the 35th Division. However, numerous factors contributed to the breakdown and subsequent collapse. Prior to the battle the leadership from division level down failed to correct identified training deficiencies. Particular weaknesses in command and control procedures and soldier discipline manifested themselves directly on the battlefield. Specifically, no maneuver element of the division

established viable headquarters or communications capabilities. The poor discipline contributed to the exceptionally high numbers of stragglers throughout the division by the end of the battle.

The 35th Division also fought an extremely poor tactical battle. It attacked in an uncontrollable formation. It only received adequate artillery support at the outset and conclusion of the battle. Finally, the Germans employed three divisions with extensive artillery support to stop the attack.

Throughout the battle the soldiers fought bravely. However, by the morning of the last attack, they were exhausted from lack of sleep, hungry from lack of food or water, and cold and wet from the weather. Combined with the confusion caused by the attacks in the fog and at night and the loss of leaders, they could not overcome these conditions. The regiments disintegrated in the Montrebeau Woods.

ENDNOTES

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¹⁰Army War College, pp. 1, 7-9.

¹¹Kenamore, pp. 28-29.

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¹⁴Army War College, p. 18.

¹⁵Headquarters, 35th Division, "The Argonne-Meuse Operation, September 9th to November 11th 1918," September 9th to September 26th. (National Archives Records Group

120, General Headquarters, 1st Army, Box 3432, File 13503.01, Argonne-Meuse Operation, Item B to Enclosure 6) Hereafter cited as "After Action Report."

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¹⁷Army War College, pp. 72-87.

¹⁸"After Action Report," September 26th to October 1st.

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²⁰Edward Payson Rankin, The Santa Fe Trail Leads to France: A Narrative of Battle Service of the 110th Engineers (Kansas City: Dick Richardson Co., 1933) Meuse-Argonne Battle Map.

²¹Headquarters, First United States Army, "Field Order No. 20," 20 September 1918, para. 3(E)(3); Headquarters, First Army Corps, American Expeditionary Force, "Field Order No. 57," 22 September 1918, (Fort Leavenworth Library Number, M/9403/H6/C.78/E3/CID), para. 3(a).

²²American Battle Monuments Commission, 35th Division, Summary of Operations in the World War (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1944), p. 13. Hereafter cited as Battle Monuments Commission.

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²⁵United States Army in the World War, 1917-1919, vol 13: Reports of the Commander-in-Chief, A.E.F., Staff Sections and Services, Part II (Washington: Department of the Army, Historical Division, 1948), pp. 22-24. This volume of the World War official history contains the G-2 report on the methods it used to conduct its operations. It describes how the AEF G-2 rated divisions as category one through four based upon an analysis of such factors as their strength, firepower, experience, and morale. Category one divisions were considered the most capable German units.

²⁶After Action Report, September 26th to October 1st; First Army Corps, U.S., Second Section, "Summary of Intelligence," not published, (Fort Leavenworth Library

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¹⁰³Terry Bull, "Second Platoon," Infantry Journal (May-June, 1939), pp. 229-232.

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¹⁰⁶Army War College, pp. 31-33.

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CHAPTER III

THE COLLAPSE OF THE 28TH DIVISION

IN THE BATTLE FOR SCHMIDT

NOVEMBER, 1944

By October 1944, the entire Allied advance across France had ground to a halt against the German frontier. After the exhilarating gains of the pursuit, the Allied forces still believed that with one more strong punch the war would soon be over. In the United States First Army sector, LTG Courtney Hodges planned to launch his main attack north of the Huertgen Forest. To support that attack, he assigned the task of clearing the forest to the 28th Infantry Division. Charles MacDonald described the results of this action as "one of the most costly actions to be fought by a United States division during World War II".

This disaster befall an experienced division that had fought from Normandy to the Siegfried Line. It had just spent a month rotating units through training in a relatively quiet sector of the front.² Consequently, the surprise and extent of the disaster prompted V Corps to launch an investigation to determine its causes. The report concluded:

...that, despite the divergent nature of the Schmidt operation, tactical planning was sound under existing circumstances. Many of the successes won by American arms ... had begun as gambles. Schmidt was a gamble that failed."

Such an answer merely begins to explain the issues involved in this division's collapse. This chapter will examine in detail why the 28th Infantry Division, the Keystone Division of Pennsylvania National Guardsmen, collapsed in the Huertgen Forest. It will review the context of the battle and the attack itself. It will analyze the two battalions which disintegrated and compare them to the remaining units which quickly became combat ineffective. Finally, it will consider several causative factors which were common to each of the units which collapsed.

ORGANIZATION, TRAINING AND EXPERIENCE

The 28th Infantry Division was activated and entered federal service on 17 February 1941. It assembled at Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania to begin training and assimilation of its first set of new personnel. Training progressed to the point that the division traveled to Virginia in September and North Carolina in October for maneuvers. On 9 December 1941, it returned to Indiantown Gap to undergo reorganization as a triangular division." During this period, Major General Edward Martin commanded the division."

The new triangular configuration of the Keystone Division contained three infantry regiments which each had three infantry battalions. The regiments were authorized 3118 soldiers of whom 2235 were company riflemen or heavy weapons crewmen. Regiments were authorized a colonel for command while battalions were commanded by a lieutenant colonel. A division artillery of four battalions, an engineer battalion and division support troops brought the authorized division strength to 14,253.⁶

In 1942, the Keystone Division experienced numerous changes. Major General J. Garsch Ord commanded the division from January until May 1942 when Major General Omar N. Bradley took command.⁷ In the beginning of the year, the division finished its reorganization to the triangular configuration. On 14 February 1942, it completed a move to Camp Livingston, Louisiana where it trained and participated in the two month Louisiana maneuver that began in September 1942.⁸

Personnel turbulence characterized that year. While at Camp Livingston, the division received its second large group of replacements to help offset the soldiers it lost to fill quotas for Officers Candidate School, the Air Corps and cadre for other divisions.⁹ General Bradley added to the turbulence when he broke up the National Guard units to redistribute the personnel throughout the division.¹⁰ A Third Army inspection report on the division's status in

July 1942, was particularly critical of the severe shortages of qualified officers and noncommissioned officers.¹¹

In January 1943, Major General Lloyd D. Brown took command of the division and moved it to Camp Gordon Johnson in Florida for amphibious training.¹² In August 1943, the division moved to West Virginia for valuable mountain training, then in September it trained off the Virginia coast in ship-to-shore operations.¹³ On 5 October 1943, it embarked on transports which arrived in Wales by the middle of the month. It spent the next nine months in England conducting pre-invasion amphibious training.¹⁴ By June 1944 it was the SHAEF amphibious reserve for the European Theater of Operations.¹⁵

The Keystone Division deployed to France on 20 July 1944. It closed on its assembly areas north and west of St. Lo, France as part of XIX Corps by 27 July.¹⁶ There, despite difficulty caused by inexperience, the division attacked toward the Vire River and eventually captured the town of Bathemo. The German resistance, strengthened by the hedgerows, was so fierce that the green division suffered approximately 750 casualties on its first day of combat.¹⁷ As a result of their poor performance during the first two weeks of August, General Brown was relieved. Brigadier General Norman D. Cota, who would command the division in the Huertgen Forest, took command of the 28th Division on 13 August 1944.¹⁸

After its initial difficulties, the division joined the pursuit across France passing through Paris on 29 August 1944.¹⁹ Working closely with the 5th Armored Division, the 28th continued northeast across the Meuse River by 10 September and sent its first patrols into Germany on 11 September. Between 14 and 18 September the division attacked the Siegfried Line near Luxembourg. During this period it gained valuable experience as it captured 137 fortified German positions before retreating in the face of a heavy counterattack. During the month of September, primarily while attacking the Siegfried Line, the division suffered 92 officer and 1470 enlisted casualties.²⁰

Between 2 and 5 October the division moved to Camp Elsenborn in the Ardennes region for rest and reconstitution. While at Elsenborn, it rotated units out of the line to absorb replacements and to conduct training. Some veterans received passes to Paris while the new personnel received limited combat experience as battalions rotated into defensive positions. The latter was particularly important because many of the replacements were former antitank, antiaircraft or Air Corps ground personnel with little infantry training or experience. Lieutenant colonels, two of whom were from the original Pennsylvania National Guard cadre, now commanded the infantry regiments. Within the infantry regiments, the

division had largely lost its National Guard character because of the influx of new personnel caused by the heavy fighting in the hedgerows of France and the Siegfried Line of Germany²¹

Despite the relatively quiet nature of the Elsenborn sector, the division suffered 28 officer and 993 enlisted casualties during October. Nonetheless, by the end of the month it was short only 7 officers and 18 enlisted men. Its after action report for the month rated its combat efficiency as "excellent." Consequently, on 25 October, the 109th and 110th Regiments began moving to Rott, Germany, to relieve the 9th Infantry Division after its battle in the Huertgen Forest.²² When the regiments began the move, they were part of a well rested, combat tested division.

ATTACK IN THE HUERTGEN FOREST

To support the First Army's main attack, originally scheduled for 5 November 1944, General Hodges assigned two missions to the V Corps. The first was to launch a supporting attack not later than 2 November to draw German reserves from his main attack. Additionally, this supporting attack was to secure the First Army's right flank by seizing key terrain in the Huertgen forest to prevent German counterattacks from that direction. Within the V Corps, this mission fell to the 28th Infantry Division.²³

V Corps was extremely specific in its directives to the 28th Division on the conduct of the attack. The general mission was to secure the high ground in the vicinity of Schmidt while maintaining contact with the VII Corps to the north.²⁴ However, operations overlays and amplifying guidance almost dictated employment of the division when V Corps specified three regimental size objectives. The division, having few options, assigned one objective to each of its organic regiments.²⁵ Furthermore, since this was the only attack along the entire First Army front at the time, the division received a significant number of attachments -- a tank battalion, a tank destroyer battalion, a combat engineer group, 46 Weasels (tracked cargo carriers) and fire support from 14 corps artillery battalions.²⁶

A mixture of enemy units faced the 28th Division. The major force was the German 275th Infantry Division which was in the process of incorporating a number of separate battalions scattered about the area into a cohesive fighting force. The German 89th Infantry Division was also in the sector undergoing relief by the German 272nd Volksgrenadier Division.²⁷ The 28th Division G-2 estimated that these units had an aggregate strength of approximately 5060 men.²⁸ V Corps reported extensive enemy artillery capable of affecting the area. Counting divisional artillery with support from Army level units,

the Germans had at least 17 battalions of different caliber which could reach the battlefield.²⁰

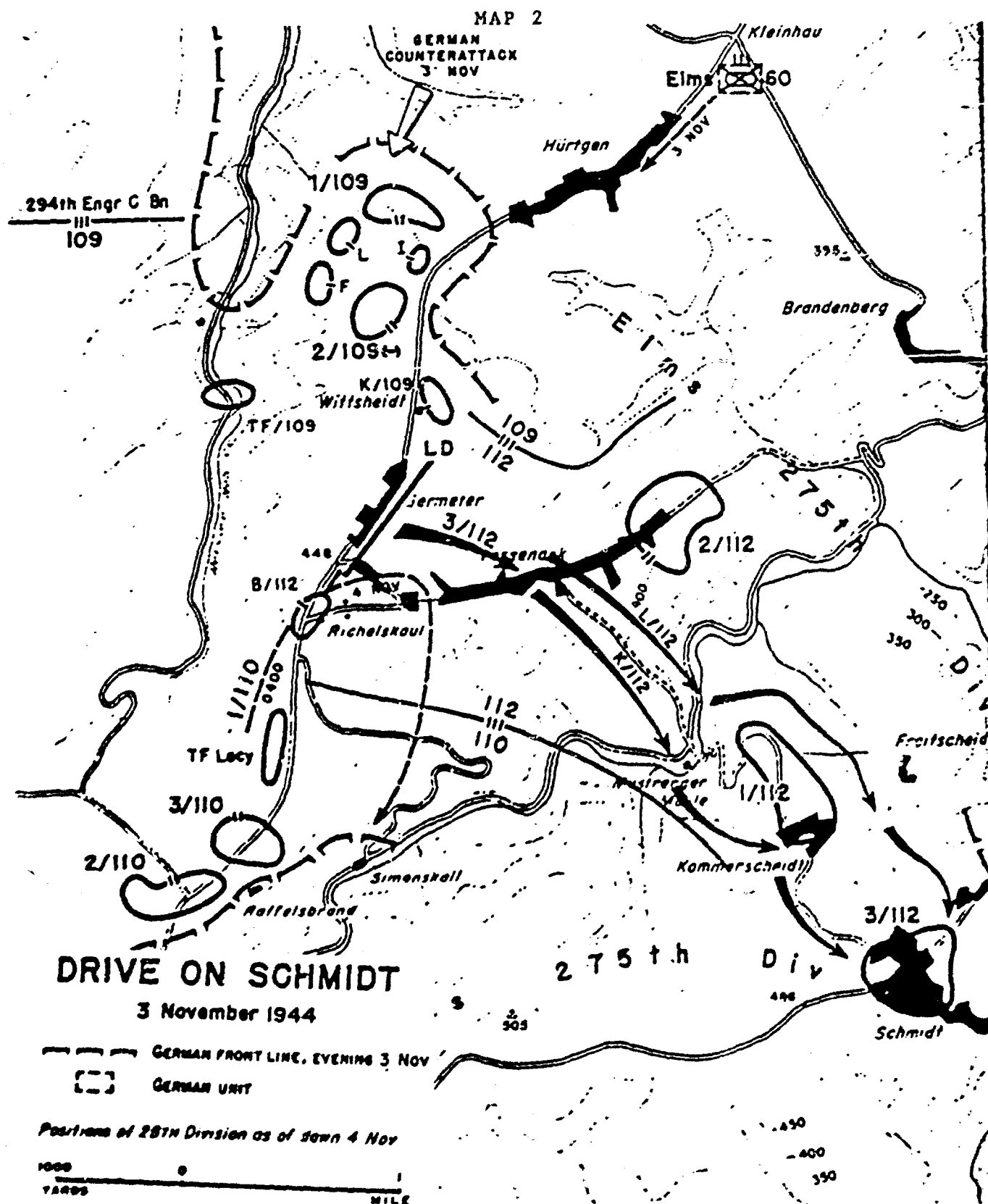
The terrain of the Huertgen Forest was extremely treacherous and the weather magnified the problems. The area was densely forested which caused disorientation and separation of units while hindering the use of direct fire artillery. Furthermore, the wreckage of the 9th Division's unsuccessful fight the previous month littered the battlefield.²⁰ In this sector of the forest, three distinct ridge lines subdivided the area. The Berneter-Vossenack ridge was in the center. The Brandenburg-Bergstein ridge lay to the northeast. It dominated the terrain by providing excellent observation for artillery. The last ridge ran from the Kall river gorge through Kommerscheidt and Schmidt to the Roer River. Finally, the Kall River gorge bisected the main axis of advance toward Schmidt. A small, treacherous cart path, eventually known as the Kall Trail, wound down into the gorge from Vossenack then back up to Kommerscheidt.²¹ The rain and drizzle during almost the entire battle further reduced the trafficability of this trail.²² (See Map 2, page 68)

Despite these adverse physical conditions, the soldiers did not anticipate a difficult fight. The G-2 reported that the forest contained only a mixed assortment of second-rate soldiers. Additionally, they believed the

Air Corps would isolate the battlefield to prevent enemy reinforcements from arriving on the scene. Consequently, with air support and the difficult nature of the terrain, they did not expect to encounter any tanks.²²

The division's battle for its objectives developed into its worst fighting in the entire war.²⁴ With three divergent missions, the action developed independently for each regiment. Not until late in the battle, when the division moved depleted battalions about the battlefield, did regiments begin to support one another. For that reason the subsequent discussion of the action will first cover the rather limited actions of the 109th and 110th Regiments to the north and south, respectively, of the main attack. The paper will then focus on the main attack by the 112th Regiment.

The 109th Infantry Regiment began its attack at 0900 hours on 2 November following one hour of heavy artillery preparation. Attacking on the left (north), its 1st Battalion met light resistance and advanced to its initial objectives. However, on the right its 3rd Battalion encountered heavy artillery, mortar and small arms fire while trying to penetrate a German position heavily fortified with mine fields and wire barricades. By the close of 3 November, progress in this sector essentially stopped as the battalions repulsed German counterattacks. In spite of continual German infiltration attempts, the



Extracted from MacDonald, Schmidt, pp. 278-279. (See note 35)

109th Regiment conducted repeated attacks to try to penetrate the German defenses until 7 November. At that point, due to heavy casualties and emergencies at other places in the forest, the regiment was relieved by the 12th Infantry Regiment of the 4th Infantry Division.³⁶

To the south of the main attack, the 110th Infantry Regiment shared a similar fate. The division's after action report described six days of slow progress, consolidation of positions, and elimination of pockets of resistance.³⁷ This sterile account only hints of the true desperation of the fighting in this sector. For two days two battalions of the regiment failed to make any progress as they mounted repeated attacks against fortified German positions. Using infiltration tactics, infantrymen attacked concrete pillboxes and log emplacements surrounded by concertina, mines and booby traps. Fighting in the most gloomy part of a dismal battlefield, the soldiers frequently advanced to within hand grenade range only to be thrown back to their starting point with heavy casualties. By the second day, one company had only 42 men remaining. Without tanks for direct fire support, the regiment could make no progress.³⁸ On 4 November, the regiment committed its reserve battalion in a flanking attack which captured Simonskall. Unfortunately, the attack did not affect the German position at Raffelsbrand in front of the rest of the regiment.³⁹ Consequently, the 110th

Regiment, failed to have an impact on the main attack toward Schmidt.

The 112th Infantry Regiment conducted the main attack in the center of the division sector. By 3 November the 3rd Battalion captured the division's main objective, Schmidt. However, this success was short-lived in the face of heavy German artillery fire and strong counterattacks with armor support. On 4 November, the defenders at Schmidt, the 3rd Battalion, broke and ran in the face of a German attack. Some joined the 1st Battalion at Komerscheidt several kilometers to the rear.⁴⁰ The 2nd Battalion, 112th Regiment held Vossenack under intense artillery fire until 6 November when it also ran from its positions.⁴¹ Finally, the 1st Battalion, 112th Regiment reinforced by about 200 stragglers from the 3rd Battalion, 112th Regiment, the reduced strength 3rd Battalion, 110th Regiment and some tank support, held Komerscheidt against strong German counterattacks until 7 November. During the night of 8 November, they withdrew back across the Kall Gorge to rejoin what was left of the division.⁴² Charles MacDonald described the loss of this action in The Siegfried Line Campaign when he said, "More than 2200 men had at one time or another crossed to the east bank of the Kall. ... little more than 300 came back in the formal withdrawal."⁴³

During the next several days the division attempted to reorganize and continue the attack. This, however, proved futile and only served to increase the already staggering casualty figures. Finally, on 14 November, the division began to withdraw to the relative quiet of the Ardennes sector.♦♦

During the first eight days of the attack, the Keystone Division reported 2631 casualties with an additional 2328 for the five subsequent days of attack for a total of 4959.⁴⁸ Of these casualties, almost all (4238) were infantrymen.⁴⁹ In the face of these staggering losses, the division failed to hold a single objective. Worse yet, two battalions disintegrated in the face of the enemy. The remainder of the division was combat ineffective.

What caused this staggering setback for the Keystone Division? Why did two battalions run? To answer these questions, this paper will now examine the unit disintegrations at Schmidt and Vossenack in detail. It will then compare them to the situation in the remainder of the division to determine similarities and differences.

COLLAPSE IN THE 112TH REGIMENT

Schmidt was the division's main objective. The 3rd Battalion, 112th Regiment, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Albert C. Flood, captured the village after only two days of relatively light fighting with few casualties. On 3

November, the 3rd Battalion left Vossenack, moved unopposed through the Kall Gorge and Komerscheidt and began occupying Schmidt in the early afternoon. Despite the light resistance, it had not been an easy day for the soldiers. From the Kall River valley, the soldiers trudged uphill in the rain along muddy paths until they occupied Schmidt. They spent a nervous afternoon clearing snipers from the town. Finally, about sunset after some confusion, the battalion established its defensive positions. Due to fatigue, rain, cold and the late hour, most of the troops occupied buildings in the town.⁴⁷

At dawn the next morning, the Germans attacked Schmidt from three sides. After about a half hour artillery barrage, tanks supported by infantry approached the town. With only a few mines scattered on top of the road and bazookas for defense, the battalion could not stop the unexpected German tanks. Within an hour, the tanks moved freely through the American position.⁴⁸ Private First Class William F. Nihelich of Company L described this action:

...the bazooka team and about 6 supporting riflemen, who had been placed about 200 yards to the left and slightly forward of the rest of the platoon got out of their foxholes and ran towards us yelling that tanks were coming right at them. ...The platoon seemed to disintegrate -- a few darted out of their foxholes and headed back into Schmidt -- a few more -- and then the whole platoon took off.⁴⁹

The rout was on. The Germans advanced into the town with their tanks firing round after round into individual positions then moving to the next. Without effective antitank weapons, the tanks were immune to American fire. The American artillery did not respond to calls for fire for over an hour.⁸⁰ Platoons lost contact with company headquarters. Company headquarters lost contact with battalion headquarters. Soldiers saw their comrades leaving their positions and assumed that they had not received the word to withdraw because the runners had been killed.⁸¹ Individually, and in groups up to company size, the battalion disintegrated. About 150 soldiers from various companies followed the Company L commander into the woods.⁸² Another 200 men ran back individually along the road to Kammerscheidt. Some were stopped by the officers there. Some kept going. Many died. Many wounded were left behind.⁸³ The battalion ceased to exist as a cohesive fighting unit.

Numerous factors contributed to the collapse of the 3/112th. The first is the isolation of the unit and the men within the unit. The battalion was at the foremost point of the division's advance. The Company L positions were isolated even from their own platoon. Division had been unable to provide any antiarmor support beyond mines and its organic bazookas to this forwardmost battalion. Finally, the artillery did not respond to calls for fire


for approximately the first hour of the battle. Taken all together, these soldiers were isolated in the front of the entire division facing German tanks with no support.

During the attack, communications within the battalion and with the supporting artillery broke down. Despite a call for artillery fire being placed almost as soon as the attack began, no fire support was received for almost an hour. Battalion had wire communications with some of its companies. However, this ended at about 1000 hours when the battalion commander ordered the switchboard disconnected in order to retreat.⁸⁴ In Company I, the company commander's only contact with his platoons was through a runner or by personal visits to the units.⁸⁵ The platoons of Company L did not have any contact with their company headquarters. As a result of this tenuous control, the soldiers communicated among themselves with rumors. The main rumor was that the soldiers still fighting had missed the word to withdraw. Consequently, they decided on their own to join their fellow soldiers who had already left.⁸⁶

Another major contributing factor to the collapse of this battalion was the tactical decisions of the leaders. Few leaders made the soldiers dig in when they finally secured Schmidt. Rather, they chose to defend the city with only an outpost line while the majority of soldiers remained in the stone buildings of the village. During the

night when antitank mines arrived, the soldiers merely scattered them on top of the road with no attempt to conceal them.⁸⁷ Finally, the leaders did not order any patrols of the surrounding area despite several reported sightings of enemy soldiers and large unidentified moving objects.⁸⁸ This poor security allowed the Germans to surprise the battalion and contributed to the panic which resulted.

Finally, the nature and intensity of the German counterattack completely surprised the defenders and contributed to their natural fear. The Americans did not expect any tanks. Theoretically they faced a mixed group of understrength, second rate infantry units. Their easy capture of the town seemed to confirm this estimate. They encountered only disorganized sniper fire in their battle for the village. Their lack of patrols kept them blind about the enemy situation. This combination led to carelessness in their defensive preparations. Consequently, when the Germans launched a coordinated attack with artillery preparations and infantry supported by armor, the Americans were both mentally and physically unprepared for this onslaught. The shock of the unexpected attack, combined with the soldiers sense of isolation, tremendously increased their normal combat fears. When they lost communications to company and battalion headquarters, their fear turned to panic.



The other unit to disintegrate in this battle was the 2nd Battalion, 112th Regiment. Unlike the 3rd Battalion, this unit endured the battle for several days prior to finally breaking under the strain. The 2nd Battalion captured Vossenack on the first day of the fighting, 2 November. Upon securing the town the battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Theodore S. Hatzfeld, established a defensive perimeter on an exposed ridgeline between the town and the forest.

At this point the ordeal of the soldiers began. German artillery observers on the Brandenburg-Bergstein Ridge had a clear view of their exposed foxholes.⁶⁰ Consequently, the soldiers endured three days and four nights of almost continuous shelling. By 5 November the officers had to order some men to eat and the battalion commander suffered from combat fatigue. The soldiers were nearly exhausted from the combination of the shelling, miserable weather and lack of sleep.⁶⁰ Just prior to dark, the Germans began concentrating their fire on individual foxholes by firing 20-30 rounds into one before moving to the next. In this manner they destroyed three fighting positions which the troops refused to reoccupy.⁶¹

On the next morning, the Germans stopped the shelling temporarily. Aware of the gap in their lines and the exposed nature of their positions, the soldiers began

individually to leave their foxholes during the pause. After about 30 minutes the Germans resumed their shelling. This proved to be too much for the mentally and physically exhausted soldiers of Company G. The remainder of the company left its positions and began a panic stricken flight to the rear. This exposed the Company F position so that company commander ordered his men to withdraw. Companies E and H, seeing their comrades fleeing, joined the exodus.⁶² As the men streamed by battalion headquarters, the staff tried unsuccessfully to stem the rout. In the end, they succeeded in forming about 70 men into a defense of the church in the center of town.⁶³

A second battalion in the division had disintegrated. It had endured almost continuous enemy artillery fire for nearly 84 hours before it broke. However, no enemy actually attacked the position.⁶⁴ The soldiers, after a temporary break in the shelling, chose to abandon their positions. Once again, a number of factors contributed to the rout.

At Vossenack the intense enemy shelling eventually terrified the defenders. As John Ellis points out in his book The Sharp End, artillery was one of the weapons most feared by soldiers. Because there was no way to respond to the shelling, the soldiers believed themselves helpless which increased their sense of isolation.⁶⁵ The evidence of that fear in this battalion was tangible. The soldiers

would not eat. Some cried when told to remain in their foxholes. Even the battalion commander succumbed to the strain as he remained in his basement headquarters with his head in his hands.⁶⁶ When the Germans concentrated their fire on individual foxholes, the men refused to reoccupy the destroyed positions. Finally, when the Germans resumed shelling after a brief pause, the soldiers decided to leave rather than continue under the shelling.

The leadership in the battalion played a critical role in fueling the rout. The battalion itself was almost leaderless. The battalion commander remained in his command post suffering from combat fatigue while the battalion executive officer, Captain John D. Pruden, became the de facto commander⁶⁷. The Company G commander was powerless to stop the collapse of his company once it began. However, the remaining company commanders contributed to the disaster. Lacking direction from battalion, the Company F commander ordered a withdrawal when he saw his position exposed. The Company E commander decided it was impossible to hold his position when he saw the men of Companies F and G stream by. He also ordered his men to withdraw. In Company H, the crews of the machine guns attempted to cover the riflemen but eventually joined them. Seeing the nature of the flight, the Company H Commander eventually ordered his mortars to withdraw as well.⁶⁸ With each subsequent company's order to

withdraw, additional soldiers joined their fleeing comrades. In seeking to protect their companies, each company commander added more men to the to the panic stricken mob.

The tactical employment of this battalion also contributed to the men's exposure. Upon occupying the town the leaders placed soldiers in foxholes on an open ridgeline. In these positions the soldiers were under the direct observation of the German artillery forward observers located on the Brandenburg-Bergstein ridge. This significantly increased the effectiveness and demoralizing nature of the German artillery.⁶⁹ Despite the deadly accuracy of the shelling, the battalion did not attempt to occupy alternate position in less exposed areas.⁷⁰

The exposed nature of the position on the ridge also contributed to the soldiers' feeling of isolation. When the gap developed in the Company G position on 5 November, the soldiers refused orders to leave the relative security of their comrades in the buildings and reoccupy the positions.⁷¹ The next day, the company nearest these positions was the first to break.

This battalion also experienced poor communications during the battle. By 3 November, artillery fire was cutting the telephone wires to the rear as soon as they were put in.⁷² By 5 November, intra-battalion communications had broken down. Companies used radio

relays to communicate with battalion. The battalion had sporadic radio contact with regimental headquarters. Intracompany communication was by runner during the infrequent pauses in the shelling. By the morning of 6 November, the soldiers main source of information was rumors passed among themselves. The rumors that day concerned potential enemy attacks and the word to withdraw. These rumors added to the panic of the companies as they withdrew.⁷²

ACTION IN THE 109TH AND 110TH REGIMENTS

While these were the only two battalions in the division to disintegrate, they were not the only ones to experience difficulties. Each of the other infantry units in the division eventually became combat ineffective. Both the 109th and 110th Regiments battered themselves against German fortifications for days with no appreciable results. The 1st Battalion, 112th Regiment came close to breaking on 7 November, but held together to withdraw as a unit from Kommerscheidt. Examination of these cases is important to understand units that lost combat effectiveness but did not collapse.

The situations in the 109th and 110th Regiments are the least complicated and most similar. Both regiments began the assault on 2 November attacking through dense forest. Both regiments repeatedly attacked German pillboxes surrounded by mines and concertina while they

endured enemy artillery. Both had limited success with one battalion which did not affect the outcome of the battle in their sectors. By 4 November, both regiments were incapable of effectively attacking. Despite this they continued to attack when ordered. With each subsequent assault the casualties mounted with no appreciable progress in taking their assigned objectives. In three days they had become totally combat ineffective.

Like the two battalions from the 112th Regiment, a number of factors contributed to the loss of combat effectiveness of these two regiments. By far the most significant was the tremendous casualties experienced by the regiments. As the casualties increased, the attacks became weaker. During the battle from 2-14 November, the 109th Regiment suffered 1168 battle and non-battle casualties while the 110th Regiment suffered 1815.⁷⁴ As a result of staggering casualties, the regiments made only feeble disorganized attacks after 8 November.⁷⁵

The second significant factor affecting these two regiments was the strength of the German defenses. The Germans overcame manpower problems by occupying strongly fortified and well camouflaged positions. They surrounded their pillboxes with concertina and minefields. Each position covered the next with interlocking fires. The positions were almost impregnable to infantry attacks without additional fire support.⁷⁶

The terrain itself complicated the conduct of the attack tremendously. Advancing soldiers became confused and disoriented in the dense forest. Consequently, formations up to battalion level became separated and disorganized. By returning each night to the line of departure to regroup, the regiments partially overcame the effects of the unit separations and individual isolation. However, even this proved insufficient to overcome the diffusing effects of the forest on the attacker.⁷⁷

ACTIONS IN THE 1ST BATTALION, 112TH REGIMENT

The last large unit in the division was the 1st Battalion, 112th Regiment. This battalion was in a position remarkably similar to those of its sister battalions. However, it did not collapse. Although incapable of continuing the attack, it managed to continue to fight until ordered to withdraw.

It crossed the Kall Gorge with the 3rd Battalion, 112th Regiment on 3 November and captured Kommerscheidt that day. The following morning it halted about 200 stragglers from the rout at Schaidt. During the next three days it endured constant German shelling, which was only broken when the Germans mounted repeated counterattacks.⁷⁸ On 7 November, the Germans attacked with two infantry battalions supported by 15 panzers and preceded by an hour artillery barrage.⁷⁹

In the attack the Germans repeated their practice of pouring 20 to 30 tank rounds into individual positions. This proved to be too much for the defenders. That afternoon the soldiers began to abandon the town individually, then in small groups. However, with the aid of friendly artillery and armor support, the commanders on the spot reestablished the battle line in the woodline. The remnants of three battalions held there until the division ordered withdrawal the next day.⁸⁰

This battalion was similar to its sister battalions in numerous ways. At the time of defeat, it was the most exposed battalion in the division. It endured intense German artillery fire for at least as long as the soldiers at Vossenack. The Germans employed the same tactic of singling out individual positions for concentrated fire. The soldiers experienced the same terrible weather. However, two significant differences did exist between this battalion and the other two in its regiment.

Unlike the 3rd Battalion, 112th Regiment, the defenders of Komerscheidt had contact with division and received extensive fire support and reinforcements. On the morning of 4 November, three tanks under First Lieutenant Raymond E. Fleig arrived and played a vital role in defending the town that afternoon.⁸¹ By 5 November, nine medium tanks and nine self-propelled tank destroyers joined the defenders. On 6 November, a battalion from the 110th

Regiment arrived to reinforce the defenders.⁸²

Throughout the operation, the soldiers received heavy artillery support and even occasional air support to assist in stopping the German attacks.⁸³

The second critical element was active leadership by the chain of command. At the highest levels, the Assistant Division Commander, Brigadier General George A. Davis, visited the battle on 4 November and spent the night.⁸⁴ The Regimental Commander, Lieutenant Colonel Carl L. Peterson, spent his time with the defenders until he received a message to return to the division headquarters on 7 November.⁸⁵

Of greater significance, the battalion and lower leaders demonstrated exceptional leadership during the engagement. A member of the ill-fated 3rd Battalion, 112th Regiment described the 6 November action:

I remember that all day of the 6th of November there was a young Major with a radio in a foxhole near me. He gave orders to the air corps and artillery all day long, directing the activity. He stood up every opportunity that he had. In fact, several times he remained up when he should have been down.⁸⁶

This major was probably Major Robert T. Hazlett, the 1st Battalion commander. The other key leadership figure at Kammerschmidt was Lieutenant Fleig. The official history makes repeated references to his tank engaging and helping to stop the German armor attacks. Finally, on 7 November, when the soldiers began to run in the face of the enemy,

quick action by the junior officers and noncommissioned officers stopped this potential rout.²⁷ This type of forward dynamic leadership differed markedly from the situations in the other two battalions.

In the end, however, neither the reinforcements from division nor the bravery of the junior leaders was enough to stop the Germans. The overwhelming superiority of the German forces attacking the defenders of Kommerscheidt eventually defeated them with extremely high losses to the defenders. Nonetheless, this collection of Americans maintained their cohesion and withdrew in a relatively orderly fashion under the leadership of their officers and noncommissioned officers.

CAUSES OF THE DIVISION COLLAPSE

With this review of the individual unit actions, this paper will now examine several elements which were common to the units which collapsed. The major factor which ultimately caused the division to become completely combat ineffective was the exceptionally high casualties suffered by all of its regiments. However, beyond this, several common factors caused units with relatively minor casualties to disintegrate in the face of the enemy. These factors also contributed to the staggering casualties suffered by all of the units and the loss of combat effectiveness of the rest of the division.

The 28th Division, particularly its infantry regiments, suffered staggering casualties in the Huertgen Forest from 2-14 November. Its three infantry regiments suffered 4684 battle and nonbattle casualties of whom 782 were missing in action.⁸⁸ The majority of these were riflemen. Given that a 1944 infantry division had 36 rifle and heavy weapons companies with 6705 soldiers, approximately 70% of the division's infantrymen became casualties in 12 days.⁸⁹ Some of these were undoubtedly replacements. Nonetheless, such a huge loss of trained and experienced soldiers in so short a period, made it impossible for the division to continue to attack. It played a major role in the collapse of the 28th Division.

In addition to casualties, the units that disintegrated experienced several other factors which contributed to their collapse. One of the most critical was the isolation of the units and the soldiers within those units. The soldiers themselves suffered from two types of isolation, mental and physical. The mental isolation was one of the most critical factors in the collapse of this division. After exposure to the enemy at the point of attack or enduring days of shelling, the soldiers came to believe that they were fighting by themselves. They saw little or no support from higher headquarters. At Vossenack, they found themselves exposed to enemy artillery fire with potential safety in sight.

There, the soldiers saw the possible safety of houses, but could not see any enemy. When the Germans began shelling individual foxholes, the soldiers that broke believed that the enemy was attacking them personally. Their only way to avoid death was to alter the circumstances of the engagement. To do this, they chose to flee.

Physical isolation of the soldiers enhanced their feelings of mental isolation. In each case where the units broke and ran, the first men to do so were the most exposed to the enemy. The soldiers who were exposed by these initial departures then joined them. As more soldiers became isolated, more soldiers left their positions. In the units that fought in the forest, the trees kept the soldiers isolated by preventing the soldiers from visual or verbal contact. Reestablishment of contact in the evening, partially overcame this potentially catastrophic condition for the 109th and 110th Regiments.

Additionally, the conduct of the operation isolated the units from one another and contributed to the belief that the soldiers were attacking by themselves. The regiments attacked along divergent axis. Consequently, the attacks were not mutually supporting and could be defeated in detail. Compounding the problem, the attacks within the regiments also failed to support one another. This was particularly devastating in the 112th Regiment where an almost impassable, forested river valley split the regiment.

The second critical factor in the collapse was the poor information flow within the division. Here, two types of information played a role. The first was formal communications by the chain of command along communications nets. The second type was informal information sharing among soldiers.

The formal divisional information channels were only marginally effective. Consequently, the division headquarters could not effectively ascertain the situation in order to support the units in trouble. Within the regiments and battalions themselves, communication with the combat elements at company and platoon was only sporadic. When in place, it was generally ineffective. With only marginal communications to their headquarters, the company commanders and platoon leaders received little guidance or support during critical tactical situations when their units were disintegrating.

Without effective formal communication, rumor took over. In each case where the units totally broke, the soldiers themselves passed the word to leave the position. Company commanders and platoon leaders decided on their own to abandon positions. Soldiers assumed that the runners with the orders to withdraw had been killed. Taken together, these impromptu actions in the heat of battle added to the confusion of the situation.

The enemy forces that attacked the Keystone Division were another major factor in the collapse of this division. The Germans eventually counterattacked with elements of three divisions including one panzer division supported by at least 17 battalions of artillery. They concentrated this massive combat power on the individually exposed battalions of the 112th Regiment. In the sectors of the 109th and 110th Regiments, the Germans occupied fortified pillboxes with extensive barbed wire and minefields to protect them. These fortifications offset any numerical deficiencies the Germans might have had.

Adding to the overwhelming strength of the German forces, they employed tactics which devastated American morale. When engaging each of the three battalions of the 112th Regiment, they eventually began firing 20 to 30 artillery or tank rounds at individual fighting positions. By singling out positions, they placed a tremendous mental strain on the defenders as they waited and wondered if their positions would be next. In each case when the Germans used these tactics, individual Americans abandoned their positions.

Next, the leadership in the 28th Division contributed to the problems experienced by the soldiers. Psychologically, the leadership experienced tremendous strain. Two battalion commanders of the 112th Regiment eventually succumbed to combat fatigue and lost control of

their battalions. Physically, unit officers sustained extremely heavy casualties. According to the division G-1 after action report, 183 officer casualties occurred from 2 to 14 November in the three infantry regiments.²⁰ It also submitted a special officer requisition for five lieutenant colonels and two colonels to replace over 50% of the battalion and regimental commanders who became casualties.²¹

The chain of command contributed to the collapse of the division through the poor tactical employment of the units. The army commander ordered the attack to continue as the only action on a 170 mile front. The corps specified three regimental size objectives that required an attack along three divergent axis. At the tactical level, the division had neither a properly prepared and coordinated plan nor an accurate appreciation of the actual situation on the battlefield. At battalion and regimental level, the command structure failed to demonstrate firm leadership or sound tactical decisions. The combination of these failures throughout the entire chain of command significantly contributed to the collapse of the division.

The last factor contributing to the collapse was the psychological strain caused by the physical conditions in which the soldiers fought. The forest itself had a depressing effect upon their morale. Upon entering the forest, the soldiers of the 28th Division saw the wreckage

of the fighting which had been ongoing for the preceding month. Enhancing this effect, the 28th Division soldiers observed the battle weary veterans of the 9th Division who withdrew from their sector. The 9th Division soldiers were so exhausted that some of them could not even lift their feet to step over the dead bodies of their former comrades.™

The dreary late autumn weather acted as a further depressant. After experiencing nearly 40 days of continual rain, the division fought this battle in six days of rain, freezing drizzle, and snow. The temperatures hovered just above the freezing levels and occasionally dipped below. Complicating the problem, the division was short over 9000 pairs of overshoes. Furthermore, many soldiers discarded their cold weather gear in the heat of the battle.™ The combination caused an extremely high number of non-battle casualties, particularly trench foot. (The division suffered 1249 non-battle casualties from 2 through 14 November. This was 27% of the total casualties of the division.)™

The intensity of the engagement completely surprised the soldiers. They expected weak, disorganized enemy resistance without armor support. What they encountered was some of the most intense fighting of the entire war. The arrival of fresh German infantry supported by armor and strong artillery to counterattack their positions, must

have shocked the Americans and severely shaken their confidence.

CONCLUSIONS

A close examination of the factors causing the collapse of the 28th Infantry Division shows that no single factor caused the unit to collapse. Faulty leadership at the senior levels gave the division a nearly impossible mission. In executing the plan at the tactical level, the leaders demonstrated poor tactical judgment in the employment of their units. Their tactical decisions threw the soldiers against well fortified positions or exposed them to strong, concentrated German attacks. The employment of the units separated them from one another and isolated the individual soldiers within the units. These dispositions hindered the flow of information within the units so that rumors replaced command authority. At the same time, the soldiers suffered tremendously from the environment in which they were fighting. The combination of these resulted in approximately 70% of the division's combat infantrymen becoming casualties in less than two weeks. Taken together, these factors proved more than the soldiers of the Keystone Division could overcome. Consequently, two battalions collapsed and the remaining seven became totally combat ineffective.

ENDNOTES

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³Charles B. MacDonald and Sidney T. Mathews, United States Army in World War II: Special Studies: Three Battles: Arnaville, Altuzzo, and Schmidt (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1952), p. 416. Hereafter cited as Schmidt.

⁴Headquarters, Third Battalion, 112th Infantry, "3rd Battalion, 112th Infantry History," History, 3/112th, 17 February 1941 to 23 July 1944, SGT Murray Shapiro. (Ft. Leavenworth Archives No. N-11232-A) Hereafter cited as "3/112th History." The fourth infantry regiment, the 11th, moved to Virginia Beach, Virginia where it guarded the coast.

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⁶Kent Roberts Greenfield, Robert R. Palmer, and Bell I. Wiley, The Army Ground Forces: The Organization of Ground Combat Troops (Washington, D.C., Office of the Chief of Military History, 1970), pp. 274-275.

⁷Almanac, p. 530.

⁸"3/112th History," 17 Feb 1941-23 July 1944, Shapiro.

⁹Cecil B. Curry, Follow Me and Dies: The Destruction of an American Division in World War II (New York: Stein and Day, 1984), p. 53; "3/112th History," 17 Feb 1941-23 July 1944, Shapiro.

¹⁰"3/112th History," 17 Feb 1941-23 July 1944, Shapiro.

¹¹William R. Keast, Robert R. Palmer and Bell I. Wiley, The Army Ground Forces: The Procurement and Training of Ground Combat Troops (Washington, D.C.: Historical Division, Department of the Army, 1948), p.

460. The Third Army Inspection Report is quoted by the authors as follows: "There is an acute shortage of officers; of the 706 authorized by the T/O, the division has 440 assigned, and of this number 106 are on special duty and detached service, several of the companies and most of the platoons are commanded by noncommissioned officers; many of the best officers have been sent on cadres. This has left company officers who are inexperienced, and at present incapable of properly instructing their men. Over eight hundred noncommissioned officers have been sent to Officers Candidate Schools, many have been sent on cadres, and those who are left are below the desired standard. ...some of the battalion commanders are over age. ... the spirit of the division has showed a lack of objective and the will to do."

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¹³"3/112th History," 17 Feb 1941-23 July 1944, Shapiro.

¹⁴Curry, p. 55.

¹⁵Martin Blumenson, United States Army in World War II: The European Theater of Operations: Breakout and Pursuit (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1961), p. 187.

¹⁶Headquarters, 28th Infantry Division, "Unit Report No. 1, from 010001 July to 312400 July 1944," 13 August 1944, p. 1. (Ft. Leavenworth Archives No. R-11232)

¹⁷Blumenson, p. 449.

¹⁸Curry, p. 58. BG Cota actually replaced BG James E. Wharton who commanded the division for less than 24 hours when he was mortally wounded.

¹⁹Curry, p. 56.

²⁰Headquarters, 28th Infantry Division, "Unit Report No. 3, from 010001 Sep to 302400 Sep 1944," 7 October 1944, pp. 2-3. (Ft. Leavenworth Archives No. R-11232)

²¹Curry, p. 57. Two regiments still had Pennsylvania National Guard regimental commanders. These were the 109th Regiment, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Daniel B. Strickler and the 112th Regiment commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Carl L. Peterson.

²²Headquarters, 28th Infantry Division, "Unit Report No. 4, from 010001 Oct to 312400 Oct 1944," 14 November 1944, pp. 2-3. (Ft. Leavenworth Archives No. R-11232)

²³Charles B. MacDonald, U.S. Army in World War II: European Theater of Operations: The Siegfried Line Campaign (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1963), p. 341. Hereafter cited as Siegfried Line Campaign.

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²⁵MacDonald, Schmidt, pp. 253-254.

²⁶MacDonald, Siegfried Line Campaign, pp. 343-347.

²⁷"Unit Report No. 5," p. 1.

²⁸Curry, p. 66.

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³⁰Edward J. Drea, Unit Reconstitution - A Historical Perspective, (Ft. Leavenworth: Combat Studies Institute, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1 December 1983), p. 33.

³¹MacDonald, Siegfried Line Campaign, pp. 344-345.

³²Drea, pp. 34-35.

³³"Unit Report No. 5," p. 1, pp. 29-30.

³⁴Drea p. 48.

³⁵MacDonald, Schmidt, p. 278.

³⁶"Unit Report No. 5," pp. 3-5; MacDonald, Huertgen Forest, p. 147.

³⁷"Unit Report No. 5," p. 4.

³⁸MacDonald, Siegfried Line Campaign, pp. 349-350.

³⁹MacDonald, Huertgen Forest, p. 157.

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- 42 "Unit Report No. 5," pp. 4-5.
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- 46 "V Corps Report," p. 6.
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- 49 "3/112th History," Co. L, 3-5 Nov., Private First Class William F. Mihelich.
- 50 MacDonald, Schmidt, pp. 297, 300.
- 51 "3/112th History," Co. L, 3-6 Nov., Lederer.
- 52 "3/112th History," Co. L, 3-5 Nov., Mihelich.
- 53 MacDonald, Siegfried Line Campaign, pp. 356-357.
- 54 MacDonald, Schmidt, p. 302.
- 55 MacDonald, Schmidt, p. 297.
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- 60 MacDonald, Siegfried Line Campaign, p. 364.
- 61 MacDonald, Schmidt, p. 335.
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CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSIONS

The preceding two chapters illustrate that large units in the American Army are not immune to collapse. Of the seven regiments examined in two different wars, five collapsed. While the other two did not collapse, they experienced a total loss of combat effectiveness. This severely endangered the corps to which they were assigned and jeopardized much larger operations. With such severe repercussions, it is essential to understand the causes for unit collapse.

The current theories on the subject suggest a number of individual factors which cause units to collapse. These theories were presented in Chapter I. The analysis of two divisions reveals that each unit manifested one or more of these theoretical causes. As Ardant duPicq suggested, units succumbed to the soldiers' fears which were enhanced by surprise. Marshall's "minor event" that starts a large panic, was present in at least two units. Isolation, a factor important to both of these authors, was frequently present. The casualty data supports Clark's contention that more issues are involved than merely casualties. Her emphasis on leadership, communications, and fire support

as critical issues, accurately identified factors which contributed to collapse in almost every unit studied. Finally, Holmes' collective exhaustion was present in both divisions. Each theory in this diverse set is accurate in that it partially explains why the units under study collapsed. However, applied individually, each falls short of a comprehensive explanation of the causes of unit collapse.

A comparison of the two divisional engagements reveals that there is no single or simple factor which causes units to collapse. Rather, a unit collapses because of a number of interactive forces. These begin at the division and higher levels as the unit prepares for combat and is initially committed to battle. Then, during the battle itself, several factors contributed to the collapse of the units involved. It is important to note that in these engagements, collapse was not inevitable. There were units which did not collapse despite experiencing the same difficulties as those that did. The manner in which these relatively successful units coped with their situation provides additional insights on factors affecting unit collapse.

CASUALTIES

One of the first issues that must be addressed to understand the causes for unit collapse is the role that casualties play. Any unit that experiences excessive

casualties will eventually lose its combat effectiveness simply because it no longer has any soldiers to continue the battle. The casualty data of these engagements indicates that collapse can occur in units with relatively minor casualties and not occur in units with almost total casualties. The following table provides a comparison of this information for the seven regiments studied.

TABLE 1

COMPARISON OF REGIMENTAL CASUALTIES

Regiment	Auth Rgt Cmbt Str ^a	Total KIA WIA ^b	%KIA WIA	Stragglers MIA ^c	%Non cmbt eff ^d
35th Division					
137	3172	1232	38%	1800	93%
138	3172	1151	36%	1168	73%
139	3172	1269	40%	unknown	unknown
140	3172	1604	51%	1468	97%
28th Division					
109	2235	1081	48%	87	32%
110	2235	1573	70%	242	81%
112	2235	1420	64%	401	81%

(See Note 1 for an explanation of the manner in which the data was compiled.)

As the data illustrates, regiments could sustain tremendous casualties prior to their collapse. In the 28th Division, the 110th Regiment never did collapse despite the

loss of over 30% of its authorized strength in less than 14 days. In the 35th Division, the 140th Regiment sustained the highest casualties in the division during its battle, 97% non-combat effective. Nonetheless, it fought the longest and advanced the furthest of any divisional unit prior to collapsing. At the other end of the scale in the 28th Division, the 112th Regiment reported only 235 casualties for the entire regiment by the close of 4 November when its 3rd Battalion collapsed. This was the lowest loss in the division at the time of the collapse.²

Based upon this, it appears that units can continue their missions until almost every infantry soldier is a casualty. However, at some point casualties will eventually overwhelm any unit and cause it to collapse or certainly render it an ineffective combat force. Since such "Spartan" performance of soldiers is extremely rare, the critical issue of this study is what causes units to collapse well before they reach this ultimate destruction.

Officer casualties, however, present a different problem. The more successful units suffered significantly fewer officer casualties than the other units in their divisions. The 109th and 110th Regiments suffered 30% fewer officer casualties than the 112th Regiment which collapsed.³ The 140th Regiment suffered almost 50% fewer officer casualties than the other regiments in the 35th Division.⁴ Since the command structures remained

relatively intact, they controlled their units much longer and more effectively. Such statistics provide initial evidence that leadership casualties may have a greater impact on their units than their small absolute numbers might indicate.

EXPERIENCE

Another preliminary issue is that collapse can occur in well-rested units that are either experienced or inexperienced. The 28th Division had three months of combat experience and nine months of assault training prior to its battle. The 35th Division, despite limited trench experience, was engaged in its first offensive operation. Both divisions had at least five days of light to no contact in position in their sectors prior to their attacks beginning. Consequently, the divisions were as well rested as any combat division could expect to be prior to a major attack. Nonetheless, the regiments and battalions within these divisions collapsed.

COMMAND AND COMMUNICATIONS

The single most important factor external to the regiments that collapsed was poor division level execution of command, control and communications functions. One of the most critical of these is adequate and accurate communications. Both divisions suffered from this problem. Poor communications between division headquarters and subordinate units contributed to the divisions'

inability to accurately assess the criticality of the situation in their regiments. It resulted in an inaccurate and misleading situation being portrayed at division headquarters and sometimes reported to corps. This hindered the divisions' ability to make appropriate tactical responses to the critical situations occurring on the battlefield. It delayed, and sometimes prevented, the coordination of critical support, particularly artillery. It contributed to the pushing of regiments beyond their breaking points and corps pushing divisions to the point of collapse.

Personal visits by the division command group, the commander, assistant commander and chief of staff, helped to alleviate some of these problems. When these individuals were present on the battlefield, the situation in their immediate vicinity did improve. However, because the battlefields involved were larger than could be personally supervised by one man or small group of men, this positive impact tended to be localized and of limited duration. Consequently, the commanders required alternate means to control their units. When communications means failed, whether they were radios, telephones or runners, the division headquarters did not overcome the problem. Consequently, the regiments had to fight their battles out of the control of and without the support of the rest of the division.

LEADERSHIP

Effective command encompasses more than just communications and the personal presence of key division officers. It includes the entire environment within the division — the command climate. Prior to the Meuse-Argonne Offensive, the command climate of the 35th Division severely hampered the division's preparations for combat. The rapid and frequent relief of battalion, regimental, and brigade commanders made the establishment of any effective leadership practices extremely difficult. It had a particularly adverse impact on unit training because the leaders did not remain in command long enough to correct training deficiencies identified by inspections. Since these deficiencies were frequently in troop control and communications procedures, the poor training contributed directly to weaknesses in these areas and subsequently to the collapse of this division.

The exercise of competent leadership within the regiments during the battle also plays a major role in their susceptibility to collapse. Once again this goes beyond the personal leadership of the commander. The lack of an effective system for commanding and controlling the combat elements can be a crucial contributing factor. This includes providing adequate "official information" to the soldiers to overcome any rumors that may be circulating. Such information sharing demands an effective

communications system. Each of the units which collapsed suffered from the lapse of at least one of these elements. Others failed to have any adequately functioning command structure whatsoever.

TACTICAL EMPLOYMENT

Another area where the divisions had a major impact on their subordinate units was in the divisions' operations plan for the tactical employment of the regiments. In preparing for the attack, the division can employ its units in such a manner as to contribute to the possibility of collapse. Both the 28th Division and the 35th Division entered battle with a poor tactical plan. The 28th Division attacked along divergent axes of advance and across an almost impassable gorge. Consequently, the units were not mutually supporting and each collapsed or became combat ineffective without aiding the others. In the 35th Division, the tactical formation of brigades in column prevented the command structure at brigade and division level from effectively controlling their units. This poor command and control was directly responsible for the collapse of at least two of the regiments.

Furthermore, since both division headquarters were unaware of the actual battlefield situation, the divisions made poor tactical decisions during the conduct of the battles. Both divisions continued to push their regiments to attack after they were almost completely combat

ineffective. This totally destroyed two regiments in the 28th Division and caused one regiment in the 35th to disintegrate. Thus, division tactical operations which hinder command and control, prevent the mutual support of subordinate units or push units beyond their physical limits materially add to the possibility of subordinate units collapsing.

At the unit level, the tactical conduct of the battle further contributes to the potential for collapse. Poor tactical decisions at the unit level can increase the mental and physical isolation of the soldiers which has a direct impact on their susceptibility to collapse. In three of the units which disintegrated, the first soldiers to leave their positions were those which occupied the forwardmost or most exposed positions. Furthermore, this happened when these soldiers were without effective fire support. This perceived, and actual, isolation enhanced the natural fear experienced by almost all soldiers in combat. The result was that the soldiers chose to leave their positions rather than to continue to face death.

ENEMY ACTIONS

The enemy's actions are another major factor contributing to unit collapse. Each of the actions studied had elements of the non-linear battlefield. This allowed the enemy to counterattack from several directions simultaneously and added to the the soldiers'

disorientation and confusion. Both divisions experienced heavy artillery fire with the 28th Division being subject to extremely accurate observed fire. The intensity of the artillery added to the soldiers' fear and increased the likelihood of collapse.

TERRAIN AND WEATHER

Terrain and weather are far from neutral elements on the battlefield and can contribute to the possibility of collapse. Conditions which tend to disperse and disorient units have the greatest impact. Fog and smoke are a "two-edged sword." They can hide an attack and greatly aid the tactical plan. However, if the units are not prepared to operate in those conditions, the potential confusion and disorganization which they can cause can prove catastrophic. The 35th Division experienced both effects. The fog concealed its attack on Vauquois Hill but also totally disorganized its two lead regiments. This disorganization played a major role in their quick collapse.

Forests, or dense foliage, can have the same effect. Both divisions in this study suffered from the disorientation and dispersion caused by the forests in which they fought. The Huertgen Forest dispersed the attacking regiments and severely hindered any cohesive unit attacks. Although the Montrebeau Woods only covered a small part of the division sector, it had the same effect

on the 35th Division. It caused entire battalions to become confused, separated and attack independently in different directions.

COMPARISON WITH COMBAT INEFFECTIVE UNITS

Although every unit experienced tremendous difficulties in its battle, the point of collapse was different for each. Some never reached it. Some units, the 3rd Battalion, 112th Regiment; the 137th Regiment and the 139th Regiment collapsed relatively early in the battle with few casualties. The 110th and 140th Regiments both fought the longest and sustained the highest casualties in their divisions before becoming combat ineffective. The differences in the operations of the relatively successful units also provides insights into important issues on the battlefield.

The most critical difference was that the successful units maintained control of their forces for a much longer period. Both the 109th and 110th Regiments did this through regrouping and reorganizing each evening after their daily unsuccessful attacks. They were thus able to reestablish some order out of the chaos and confusion caused by the forest and battle. This contrasts sharply with the 137th and 139th Regiments in the 35th Division. These two regiments never stopped to reorganize and reestablish control by the chain of command. Consequently, even though they attacked in more open terrain, they never

overcame the effects of their initial disorganization.

Finally, in the 2nd Battalion, 112th Regiment, the unit which held Kommerscheidt, the leadership performance was markedly different from its two sister battalions which disintegrated. The unit was visited by both the assistant division commander and the regimental commander. The battalion commander and junior leaders were visible and active during the course of the battle. This differed significantly from the 1st and 3rd Battalions, 112th Regiment where both battalion commanders succumbed to combat fatigue and the junior leaders contributed to their units' collapse. It is important to contrast this with the leadership of the 35th Division. In the 35th Division the regimental, brigade and division commanders were also well forward visiting their units. However, they failed to maintain functioning command posts when they did so. Consequently, while their actions had an impact in their immediate area, they also caused the loss of control of the remainder of their units.

AREAS FOR ADDITIONAL STUDY

The preceding analysis illustrates that a variety of interactive factors cause units to collapse in combat. The United States Army will face many of those same issues on the battlefields of the future. The command, control and communications problems which were major issues in each unit are even more complex and difficult today. Every

division must prepare a tactical plan prior to combat which will have a direct impact its subordinate units' susceptibility to collapse. The nonlinear nature of the battlefield has become more pronounced with each conflict. Units will sustain extensive leader, as well as soldier, casualties that must be overcome to continue effectively. The terrain and weather are always present and never neutral. Finally, the enemy will be doing everything possible to cause the very conditions which contribute to unit collapse. The United States Army should seek to impose the same result on its foes.

With that goal, several additional areas of study have potential to provide further insights into the subject of unit collapse. By its scope, this study was limited to only two divisional engagements with seven regiments. Consequently, the conclusions provide only initial possible explanations for the causes of unit collapse. A study of other actions would provide further information for analysis and comparison. Additionally, this paper focused on unit collapse. However, the conclusions indicate areas beyond that specific topic which require further study.

Future research in this unit collapse could focus on several issues identified in this paper. One of the most important is the interactive nature of the various factors which contribute to unit collapse. Another major issue is the impact of the nonlinear battlefield on the potential

for collapse. In this same area, identifying techniques for establishing and maintaining order in the chaos of battle is particularly important. Additionally, more study can be done on the role of the leader in preventing and contributing to collapse. The role of communication and information sharing is another area for possible study. Finally, the types of tactical operations which increase the probability of collapse should be identified.

Beyond these areas specifically dealing unit collapse, this paper suggests several broader issues which may need study. One area of critical importance is the impact that massive casualties, like those experienced by these two divisions, would have on the Army's COHORT battalions. Of particular importance is how these battalions will be reconstituted when these casualties do occur. With the Total Force concept, a second critical issue is the degree of training required for National Guard and Reserve officers to insure they continue in command and avoid wholesale replacements on the eve of the battle. Finally, the role that leadership casualties play in any type of combat and methods to overcome those effects are areas which could have immediate practical application. Such information would be of value in preventing collapse within the United States Army. Hopefully, it would be of greater value in providing potential methods of creating those conditions in future enemies.

ENDNOTES

¹It is recognized that comparison of casualty figures is hazardous at best and the use of percentages can be misleading. Furthermore, they are subject to the reporting practices of the different wars and the information available. In an effort to minimize the confusion caused by these issues, the following explanation of the casualty table in this chapter is provided.

a. Authorized regimental strength represents the combat strength that a regiment organized according to the standard Army requirements for the respective wars would have. Since the 28th Division was at 100% strength, and each regiment of the 35th Division had more soldiers assigned than authorized combat strength, it was assumed that all positions were filled at the start of the attack.

b. The number of casualties represents the total number of killed and wounded for the selected regiments during the course of the battle. It was assumed that 100% of the casualties for the infantry regiments came from the combat elements of those units. Data for the 28th Division is somewhat misleading because that division received 3843 replacements during the twelve days of the battle. Consequently, that division replaced nearly 67% of its infantry strength during the battle. The 35th Division did not receive replacements during its battle. Data for the 28th Division is taken from "Unit Report No. 5," pp. 8-16. Data for the 35th Division is taken from Battle Monuments Commission, pp. 24-26. Replacement data is from Clark, p. 40.

c. The missing-in-action figures for the 28th Division are precise figures taken from "Unit Report No. 5." The straggler figures for the 35th Division are computed as outlined in Chapter 2.

d. Percentages are calculated by dividing the casualty figure by the authorized figure. The last column indicates the total percentage killed, wounded and missing for the entire battle.

²"Unit Report No. 5," pp. 8-16.

³"Unit Report No. 5," pp. 8-16.

⁴Army War College, p. 52.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY

While several works have been written concerning the nature of battle and men in battle, I am not aware of any that deals more than superficially with the causes for unit collapse in combat. Perhaps the closest is Dr. Dorothy Clark's "Casualties as a Measure of the Loss of Combat Effectiveness of an Infantry Battalion," (The Johns Hopkins University, Technical Memorandum, ORD-T-289, August, 1954). This study reviewed 44 different infantry battalion engagements in World War II to determine the extent of unit casualties at the units' breakpoint.

Most works are more general, covering a wide variety of topics relating to the nature of combat and man's reactions to battle. Any study dealing with causes of unit collapse must begin with a firm understanding of these two subjects. Two classics in the field are Charles J. Ardant duPicq, Battle Studies: Ancient and Modern (reprint ed., Harrisburg, PA: The Military Service Publishing Company, 1946) and S.L.A. Marshall, Men Against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command in Future War (reprint ed., Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1978). Recent works include Elmar Dinter, Hero or Coward: Pressures Facing the Soldier in

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In analyzing the actions of the 35th Division, Army War College, "The Thirty-fifth Division, 1917-1918" (Army War College, Historical Section, 1921-1922) is the absolute best source of information. Prepared from many original sources shortly after the war, it provides a detailed and unbiased report on the actions of the 35th Division from activation through training and the battle in the

Meuse-Argonne. Clair Kenamore, From Vauquois Hill to Exermont: A History of the Thirty-fifth Division of the United States Army (St. Louis: Guard Publishing Co., 1919), is the best of a number of division and regimental histories covering the 35th Division in World War I. The American Battle Monuments Commission, 35th Division, Summary of Operations in the World War (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1944), provides a brief official account of the division's history. However, it occasionally skips controversial issues. Conrad H. Lanza, "Supporting an Infantry Division," Field Artillery Journal, 23 (September-October, 1933), primarily deals with artillery support of the division on 29 September, but also sheds light on the entire division's actions that day. Both Terry Bull, "Second Platoon," Infantry Journal (March-April, 1939), and Daniel M. Fels, History of "A" Company, 138th Infantry (St. Louis: Woodward and Tierman Printing Co., 1919), give insights into the problems faced by the riflemen during the attack.

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document provides the findings of the I Corps Inspector General concerning the "Tactical employment and conduct of the 35th Division," as well as transcripts of interviews with key division and corps participants in the action. Headquarters, 35th Division, "The Argonne-Meuse Operation, September 9th to November 11th, 1918," (National Archives Records Group 120, General Headquarters, 1st Army, Box 3432, File 13503.01, Argonne-Meuse Operation, Item B to Enclosure 6), is the division's after action report on the events leading to and during the attack.

For the 28th Division in the Huertgen Forest, Charles B. MacDonald is the foremost authority. He has published three books which cover the division's attack in varying degrees of detail and from different perspectives. Two of his books are part of the official Army historical series dealing with World War II. His first, United States Army in World War II: Special Studies: Three Battles: Arnaville, Altuzzo, and Schmidt (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1952), is based upon post-combat interviews with the survivors of the battle. It is an extremely accurate and detailed narrative of the 112th Regiment's attack toward Schmidt with the relevant division supporting actions. His second book, U.S. Army in World War II: European Theater of Operations: The Siegfried Line Campaign (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1963), places the 28th

Division's attack in the context of the overall Allied assault on Germany. Although less detailed than Schmidt, it provides more information on the 109th and 110th Regiments. Finally, MacDonald published The Battle of the Huertgen Forest (New York: Modern Literary Editions Publishing Company, 1963), in which he devotes a chapter to the 28th Division's role in the series of attacks into the forest.

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The most important primary sources for this study were the division after action reports, Headquarters, 28th Infantry Division, "Unit Report," Numbers 1 through 5 (Ft. Leavenworth Archives No. R-11232). These reports identify the major events in which the division participated during the relevant month. "Unit Report No. 5" for 1 to 30 November 1944 was critical to assessing the impact of the twelve day battle on the division. A second significant

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